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08.
偶像峻烈

!!屋味ゆい

Illustration:okiura



08. 偶像峻烈

学戦歌部物語

ルガールカ

RUSALKA

トゥーリア

TUULIA

Tuulia

ハイタク

PÄIVI

Päivi



Eニカ

MONICA

Monica

マヘルナ

Mahulena

Mähulena

エリカ

MILUŠE

Miluše





第一二十四回

綾斗たち参加学生をぐるりと見回し、メサが言葉を続ける。

壇上のマディアス・メサが、星武祭の開会式。



沙夕宮紗夜

SASAMIYA SAYA

Sasamiya Saya



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Chapter 01: Military Drill

When the School Festival ended, the wind of early summer blew to Asterisk before long.

The sky was high, perfectly clear, the trees shook the bright green treetops and the blazing sunlight became stronger day by day; it was such a season.

Despite this, Ayato and company, having no room to feel such a change, have secluded themselves in a training room and were striving to practice in their special training for the team battle.

“Which reminds me, I heard it from Yabuki, but it seems the stages have been upgraded for the <Gryps>.”

“Yes, looks like it. If I’m not mistaken, four stages, namely the large stage and the 3 main stages, have been upgraded.”

While doing stretches before the training, when the subject, which she had heard about the other day, was brought up, Julis answered like so as she did not seem to have that much interest in it.

“Thanks to that, the Official Ranking Battle’s battle ground has been changed to a mid-sized stage and this is a real nuisance for us.”

An Official Ranking Battle was often held monthly in an arena within each school, but stages of urban areas, where the general visitors could watch the battles with an observation card, were also used. This was a key event which gathered tourists in Asterisk during the period of time when a <Festa> was not being held — although there was exceptions like World Dragon — and when it came to a <Page One>’s match, it was customary that no less than a large-scale stage was allotted.

In fact, both Ayato and Julis turned down challengers in the main stage, the Sirius Dome, last month. Because Julis excelled at long-range battle, it would be desirable that the stage was wide.

“But even if you say such a thing, didn’t you overwhelm that <Thunder> last time?”

The Seidoukan Academy Rank #7 and user of the scholarship Ogre Lux <Demonic Bow of Infinity (Longshanks)> was an opponent whom Julis herself once said that she had bad affinity with. But in the Official Ranking Battle last month, Julis faced that formidable opponent who excelled more than her at long-range battles, and won with a margin of safety.

Having obtained the new armament called Rectoluz also played a great part in it, but above all the fact that Julis herself grew in strength rapidly in this one year was probably the primary factor. From her physical ability, amount of prana, and variety of techniques to the subtleties of their activation timing..... all of them showed steady improvements precisely because of the cumulation of her daily training.

“Humph, even if you say that, yours was much easier, right?”

Julis curled her lips into a smile as she said so teasingly.

Since the time when Ayato had defeated Kirin and took the seat of rank #1, he certainly defeated almost all the challengers handily in the Official Ranking Battle. Although, even so, the fact that there was no end to the number of challenging students would be evidence of how exceedingly special the title of rank #1 was after all.

“Well at any rate, things such as the stage’s upgrade aren’t that unusual. I think that it’s not really something to mind though.”

“.....On the contrary”

Saya, who was checking her hand gun type lux, butt in at that point.

“I heard that the upgrade this time was quite large scale. They said that a new type of defensive mechanism that Allekant developed was incorporated.”

“A new type of defensive mechanism, is it?”

Kirin, who had put Senbakiri on the floor and loosened her body, inclined her head to the side as if to say that it was the first she heard of it.

“It seems that the protective gel for shock absorption that Allekant’s <Dark Lady Faction (Sonnet)> developed was used.”

“Hou, you’re quite well-informed, huh.”

When Julis replied questioningly to Saya’s unexpected comment, the latter curtly answered while looking at the hand gun in her hand from various angles.

“Last time, I heard it when I spoke with Camilla Pareto.”

“Heeh..... wait, eeeh!?”

Because she had said it too casually, they almost went with the flow reflexively. Speaking of Camilla Pareto, she was the head of Allekant Academy’s <Lion Faction> and a talented woman who was in charge the armaments of the autonomous puppets Ardi and Rimsi; but she should have had principles that are completely contrary to Saya’s.....

“Since when did you guys have a relationship where you talk casually like that?”

“Have you reconciled with her?”

It seemed that Ayato was not the only one surprised; Julis and Kirin too looked at Saya with flabbergasted faces.

“It’s not really like that. I’ll settle things properly with Camilla Pareto someday; that hasn’t changed. But..... it’s not really like there are still ill feelings between us.”

As Saya returned the lux to its setup state, she heaved a small breath.

“For a little while now, I’ve come to think about the state of my luxes in my own way. Of course, it’s not like I make light of my father’s guns — since they are the weapons made only for my sake, I think that they probably aren’t too fit for team battles.”

Although the luxes, which Saya used, certainly have high firepower, judging from the viewpoint of accurate shooting, one could not but say that there was slight difficulty. Though Saya’s shooting skill itself was superior, even with it, the possibility of harming her allies in the case of melee would by no means be small.

After all, in the stage of the <Gryps>, a total of ten people, enemies and allies, would fight jumbled together. In the area where the rear guard supported the vanguard, it was an undeniable fact that more accurate shooting was demanded.

“That’s why I intend to prepare my weapons for team battle in a way that I thought about myself.”

“I see, so that’s why Sasamiya-san has often come and went to the Meteoric Engineering Research club’s factory as of late, huh.”

And, Claudia, who was listening to the conversation silently until then, clapped her hands as if she understood.

“Heeh, so that’s it.”

According to Eishiro, the Meteoric Engineering Research Club, among the prominent major clubs even in Seidoukan, exceeded the academy’s equipment department in the adjustment of luxes. Although one could say that, Ayato, who had left <Ser-Versta>’s maintenance to the equipment department, did not feel dissatisfaction towards their work.

In contrast with the equipment department that performed adjustments precisely, if anything the Meteoric Engineering Research Club seemed to have the tendency of performing quite peaky^[1] adjustments.

“.....For the time being, since a workshop was necessary, I provisionally joined the club.”

“Saya in a club?”

That too was the first time they heard of it.

This was because just like Julis, Saya was not one to have too much interaction with others assertively.

¹ Okay I could not make sense of this immediately so I decided to a quick Google search. That resulted in finding this: <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E2%80%9C%E2%80%9D>. From what I understand of this peaky is used to refer to an engine that has an inconstant number of rotations at different gears (primarily more rotations at higher gears) as opposed to a consistent rotation at every gear. However, I’m no expert at Japanese nor am I at cars so take that with a grain of salt.

From that information I think peaky means something along the lines of “over performing in various areas” with a connotation that it will have inconsistencies as well as context leads me to believe that it will not be without some demerits or strange “side effects”. So basically I think peaky is just another way of saying they might be adjusting it a little too well and as such might have issues (Hurray for mad scientists!) by Yascob

“Then, since Camilla Pareto showed up there, we just had some conversations.”

Camilla was also the person in charge of the development of the new model lux — Rectoluz jointly developed by Allekant and Seidoukan. Although the Rectoluz was already completed, it was still decided, that for the time being, data collection would be carried out as well as support from the joint cooperation of Allekant and Seidoukan.

By the way, Seidoukan side started a special committee consisting of members of the equipment department and the Meteoric Engineering Research Club on taking part to this project. Therefore, the fact itself that Camilla showed up in the factory of the Meteoric Engineering Research Club was not strange, but even so the fact that the two girls came to exchange conversations normally probably meant, as Saya had said, there were no particular ill feelings, or a source thereof, remaining between them.

“Hmm..... Then, does this mean that you’re developing a new weapon, Saya?”

“As expected, making it from scratch would be impossible practically, time-wise and environmentally. So, I intend to make do by customizing an existing weapon. Still, it’s doubtful whether or not it’ll be in time for the <Gryps>.”

“No, it’s amazing enough.”

It looked like Saya too was thinking about various things for the team battle. It might have been triggered by Julis, who mastered the Rectoluz, and Kirin’s considerable growth, but it was without doubt a good direction.

When Ayato honestly praised her like that, Saya stuck out her small chest slightly bashfully.

“Yes..... you can praise me more.”

While Ayato smiled wryly, he gently put his hand on the head of such a childhood friend.

“Yo, you’ve gathered, huh, brats.”

Having appeared there with a listless greeting was Ayato and company’s homeroom teacher, Yatsuzaki Kyouko. She carried her familiar nail bat on her shoulder, and her uselessly excessive pressure was amazing as usual.

“Huh, Yatsuzaki-sensei..... what’s the matter?”

“Hah? It’s not ‘what’s the matter’. You’re the one who called me, right?”

At the same time as she struck her nail bat on the floor, Claudia took a step forward.

“Ah, I forgot to mention it, but actually, I intend to hold combat practice for team battle from today on..... so, I asked Yatsuzaki-sensei to be our opponent.”

“Eh.....?”

“.....You should say such things sooner, Claudia.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be careful next time.”

As Julis glared at her, Claudia *honestly* bowed her head — but, her words were quite hollow.

“Err..... So, when you say combat practice, you mean that it won’t be coordination’s training like until now, but that we’ll *actually* do team battles?”

“Yes, I think that we’ve already brought our individual coordination up to a level where we should have any problems. Also, we can’t confirm how far it will work toward those who are at main battle level, or how to cope with improvising tactics and situation assessments in a group battle unless it’s an actual combat.”

Although they were surprised, nobody showed dissatisfaction.

There was persuasiveness in the words of Claudia who was the only person in this team to have participated in the <Gryps>.

“Besides, even if a team battle is a mock battle, it’s difficult to find an opponent for training. Not wanting to reveal the scope of one’s power is the same for both sides, or unless it’s a very confident team, otherwise they wouldn’t accept it. Just so you know, there’s also the method of simulation battle, but.....”

Claudia revealed a vague smile there.

Without her continuing her words further, Ayato could understand, as well. A three-dimensional simulator was also implemented in this training room, but there were a lot of restrictions, so it was incomparable with the experience which would be provided in actual combat.

Plainly speaking, it meant that it was hard to gain actual fighting experience with it.

“And there comes Yatsuzaki-sensei.”

When Claudia said so, Kyouko exaggeratedly sighed.

“Well, it’s bothersome, but this too is the duty of a teacher. Even leaving that out, I somewhat owe this girl. I’ll keep you company to your heart’s content.”

“We’re very thankful for that, but.....”

Julis looked around quizzically while saying so.

“Since we’re speaking about a team battle’s practice match, where are the other members?”

“Ah! You don’t have to worry about that. They’ve already gathered.”

When Kyouko casually swung once the nail bat in her hand as she said that, the disorderly hammered nails begin to radiate bluish-white light.

“.....!”

One could see Julis, who was a <Strega>, holding her breath.



A large quantity of mana was released instantly, and it gradually materialized while winding into raging whirlpools — just as if reproducing a claymation^[2], it made up shapes of humans from the feet.

These smooth dolls without eyes, nose nor mouth, totaled to four. Their whole bodies were dark blue like the depths of the sea and they all had the same stature and build as Kyouko. As a matter of fact, they had neither clothes nor weapons.

“This is..... is this like Gustave Malraux’s demonic beasts?”

“It looks to me like the shadow dolls of that person who kidnapped Flora-chan.....”

Julis’s and Kirin’s impressions were different each, but in any case it was without doubt Kyouko’s ability as a <Strega>.

—But.

“.....If I’m not mistaken, I’ve heard that Sensei’s ability is essentially effective against ability users.”

To the words of Saya who did not quite understand, Ayato nodded, too.

According to the rumors, it was said that Kyouko was a <Strega> which possessed overwhelming advantage against <Strega> and <Dante>. The dolls in front of them did not really look like that.

“Taking in the target’s ability and making it her own, that is Yatsuzaki-sensei’s power. This is also the first time I see it actually though.”

Without hiding her wariness, Julis muttered in a low voice

“In other words, stealing the target’s ability.....?”

“Something like that. Well, it doesn’t seem like the one whose ability is stolen becomes unable to use it, though.”

If it was true, then it could only be described as a threat for Julis who was a <Strega>. So it was understandable that she would be cautious.

“These dolls have the ability of my old teammates. I can use a puppet which copied the targets’ combat abilities as is. It’s a copy of myself this time though.”

“When you say teammates, do you mean the ones of the time when you won in the <Gryps>?”

The team, which Kyouko had led before, was the legendary team which had won the only <Gryps> in all Le Wolfe Black Institute’s history. Ayato did not know the details either, but he had heard a story that all of the team’s members were <Strega>.

² this is the process of using clay to create an animation by taking a picture then moving or molding the clay a bit and repeating to eventually create an animation. Some notable examples are Wallace and Gromit, and Shaun the Sheep.

“Well, one eye-witness is better than many hearsays^[3]. For the time being, you’ll understand once you fight.”

Kyouko, not answering Ayato’s question, threw out four lux activation bodies from the holder hung to her waist to the faceless puppets.

“—I’ll show you the power of the <Witch of Nail Severing>, former Le Wolfe Black Institute rank #2.”

*

The mechanical voice announced the mock battle’s start, and Ayato cut through the vanguard.

In Ayato and company’s team, the offensive hands in charge of the vanguard were three people: Ayato, Kirin and Claudia, who was also the team leader. It was a relatively offensive team with Saya in charge of the rear guard and Julis acting as the guerilla, as she would attack the enemy or assist her allies as the situation dictated.

In contrast, Kyouko’s team had a puppet which set up an assault rifle type lux and two puppets which took aim with dual handguns as the rear guard. A puppet which took a stance with a long sword type lux held at eye-level and a dual-wielding puppet with two small sword type lux, one in each hand, were at the vanguard.

The team leader — Kyouko, carrying her usual nail bat on her shoulder — had taken position slightly behind the two vanguards; she was probably acting as the guerilla. Two vanguards, two rear guards and one guerilla — this was generally the team formation said to have the best balance.

In a team battle, one loses when the team leader’s school badge was destroyed, when the team leader loses consciousness, or by declaring give up. Conversely speaking, there will no problem if only the leader remains standing.

“Haah!”

First, Ayato brandished <Ser-Versta> as he determined his aim at the puppet which set up a long sword, but—

The puppet with the long sword withdrew to the rear with a back step and immediately after, countless light bullets attacked Ayato. It was a diversionary attack of the opposing team’s rear guard.

“Kuh.....!”

Although Ayato was able to easily evade such a simple attack as he had grasped every movement in the battlefield with his state of “cognition”, he had no choice but to give up pursuit due the rain of light bullets diverting his attention incessantly.

³ a Japanese idiom probably meaning seeing with one’s own eyes is faster than hearing rumors or something like that. I don’t know how to explain it well

(Is she aiming at me with the two rear guards.....?!)

“Hahaha, listen Amagiri! In a team battle, don’t think that there’d be all that many idiots that would challenge someone in close combat!”

Kyouko shouted as such with a fearless smile.

“In you guys’ team, the one whom people will be the most cautious about and prepare elaborate countermeasures for, is without doubt, you and your <Ser-Versta>, Amagiri. After all, unless the other party has an ogre lux of the same rank, they won’t even be able to cross swords with you. There’s no obligation whatsoever to exchange blows with a guy swinging such a frightening thing.”

“Well, that’s true, huh..... oops!”

Ayato responded like so with bitter feelings as he cleared away the unceasing barrage with <Ser-Versta>.

Kyouko’s words were probably true.

Speaking of being cautious, it was probably the same for Claudia’s <Pan-Dora> too; but it was not like its (Pan-Dora) actual condition had become common knowledge yet. As it seemed like there was only vague information that its ability was speculated to allow its user to see the future — of course, this was the result of Claudia’s careful information manipulation strategy — there would be no way to create measures against it.

In comparison to that, countermeasures to <Ser-Versta> were clear and simple.

For example, one should just avoid close range combat with Ayato to the utmost and utilize long-range attacks.

Although, having been said that, even if the two of them attacked, Ayato too would not let himself being hindered so easily by ordinary opponents, even leaving aside the shooting accuracy of the puppets that Kyouko manipulated. Either way, their timing was good.

When facing an opponent or in an emergency, If he were to intent to change to defense and evasion, the opponents will slow down their shooting and come to others aid. If he were to shift to attack, then a carefully aimed light bullet would come toward his vitals right at that moment.

The Rectoluz, operated by Julis, sent out an attack intended to interfere with the shooting, but the puppets, while evading it by light footwork, did not break their lines of fire at all.

“But Ayato-senpai isn’t this team’s only swordsman!”

Kirin and Claudia, who moved, flanking from both sides, headed for Kyouko.

They probably aimed at Kyouko who was the leader, thus deciding the victory in one movement.

—But.

“Of course, I know that.”

“!”

The opponent team’s two vanguards, who had withdrawn a little while ago, each released a slash so as to stop Kirin’s and Claudia’s advances.

The two girls crossed swords with the puppets head on as is, Kirin fiercely exchanging blows with the puppet with the long sword and Claudia the dual-wielding one.

Unexpectedly, the puppets’ ability was at a level hardly inferior to that of Kirin and Claudia. No, judging from only sword skill, there were no doubt that the two girls had the edge, but as expected their (puppets) way of taking the range and their way of taking away one’s timing was outstandingly good. Moreover, the puppets of the rear guard, which were holding Ayato, also shot suppressing firing towards the two girls whenever they saw an opening. At this rate, even if they were Kirin and Claudia, it would be difficult to shake them off immediately.

Only Ayato’s perception which was expanded when in the state of “cognition” noticed movement to the rear.

“.....Ayato, dodge.”

When he heard these words, Ayato had already moved out of the line of fire without even looking back.

“Kaboom.”

Immediately after, a huge light bullet from Helnekrom that Saya had fired slightly grazed him by a paper-thin margin and directly hit Kyouko — a blast blew violently.

While using <Ser-Versta> as a shield from the incessant rain of bullets, even now, Ayato checked for Kyouko’s presence on the other side of the fiery winds.

It should have been a timing which would have been hard to evade, but when the smoke, that had risen up densely, cleared away, a wall of sand stood there, towering, as if to protect Kyouko.

(If I had to guess, that’s also the ability of a different person, huh.....)

The sand wall slowly crumbled down, and was once again reverting to mana.

If an ability was hidden in each of the nails hammered into that bat, honestly Ayato’s side had no hand to play. It was natural as they had no information at all. Speaking of countermeasures they had come up with, they could only bring her down before letting her use countermeasures of her own.

“—Bloom proudly, Six-Petal Burst Firebloom (Amaryllis)!”

Suddenly, Julis’s sharp and dignified voice resounded.



Julis, who had sneaked around to Kyouko's blind spot during the recent exchange of blows, swung her thin sword and released blazing fireballs. Moreover, she maintained the three-dimensional attack of Rectoluz, which she turned towards the rear guard's opponents, as is. Though at this late hour, one could not help but be astonished at her abilities in spatial perception.

(But, this is the best timing.....!)

Matching his timing with that of Julis, Ayato shortened his distance to Kyouko, albeit slightly forcibly.

Although his prana was chipped away as he was struck by several light bullets, incurring some damage for this opportunity could not be helped.

Were she to try to either defend against or evade Julis's fireballs, Ayato would jump at the opportunity of a certain victory in that opening.

Although, if Kyouko were to try to evade it, Julis could simply make her Six-Petal Burst Firebloom (Amaryllis) explode. It would be impossible to escape from everything in its effective range. In that case, there was also a possibility for Ayato being caught up in the explosion, but he could grasp it^[4] to some extent, estimate and evade it with the state of "cognition".

Conditionally, Ayato's side was advantageous.

"Oi, oi, scary."

But, there was no impatience on Kyouko's face.

As she calmly glanced at the fireballs, she lightly dodged out of their lines of fire.

"In that case, I'll do this..... explode!"

In response to the dodge, Julis made the fireballs explode as she had anticipated it.

A roaring sound shook the air, and flash of light and explosive flames raged — but.

"—Isn't that a bad move with me as your opponent?"

Just like water being sucked up into an empty hole in the bottom of a lake, the flames flowed into the palms of Kyouko's hands, which were held out towards them.

"Wha.....!"

"Heeh, the three of them were quite powerful, eh, Riessfeld. It's a good ability."

Between Kyouko's fingers, which were grasped as if to squash the blast, three nails, just like the ones stuck into her bat, let their sharp tips stick out.

(So, she stores another person's ability in that way, huh.....!)

⁴ 'it' for effective range

As expected of someone who won a <Festa>; the rumors of being able to counter all ability users were not necessarily a lie.

“But, at this distance.....!”

Even so, Julis's attack gained enough time for Ayato to shorten the distance.

He slashed with <Ser-Versta> in a high chop aiming for the pseudo-school badge on Kyouko's chest — Just before that.

“—Well then, I'll use it at once.”

Ayato felt a shiver down his spine, stopping his attack immediately and leaped back.

Immediately after, the moment that a bluish-white light ran from Kyouko's hand, fireballs filled with fiery winds appeared before Ayato's eyes — and exploded.

It was Julis's Six-Petal Burst Firebloom (Amaryllis).

“Guh.....!”

Although he somehow defended against it, Ayato was greatly blow away by the shock and landed while rolling on the training room's floor.

“Oh, your judgment just now was good. I'll praise you for that.”

Kyouko revealed a carefree smile and once again put the nail bat on her shoulder.

“Well, thanks for that.....”

While wiping off the sweat covering his forehead, Ayato slowly stood up.

Checking the surrounding's situation again, the puppets, which were fighting Kirin and Claudia, withdrew to the rear and the rear guard's puppets also stopped their shooting. This meant that they had gone back to a square one.

“Oh, well you aren't bad overall. For your first team battle, I'll give you a passing mark. Even as you're now, you can probably qualify for the main battle participation easily. Though I'll say it like this, there's a world of difference from the previous team that Enfield led^[5].”

Kyouko said in listless, yet somewhat intimidating, tone, like that of her teaching in class.

“.....But, at this level it'll be a little hard to aim at the championship.”

Then as her voice suddenly lowered, her upturned eyes shone keenly.

“Listen well. You guys — especially Amagiri and Toudou, are above the current me when it comes to body specs. It's also the same regarding techniques of close range combat.

⁵ meaning that there were way better than Claudia's previous team

However, Toudou wasn't able to break through a puppet which only has the same abilities as me, and Amagiri wasn't able to bring me down. Do you know why?"

".....Is it because the coordination between Sensei and her puppets is above ours?"

As Saya puffed her cheeks in displeasure, Kyouko sighed while putting a hand on her waist.

It looked like she was relaxed, but the prana kneaded to every corner of her body did not waver at all. The puppets adopted a stance in which they could immediately restart the battle as well.

"Well, you can call it an old man's wisdom in this situation, but if I only ended with that, that wouldn't count as a lecture, right? Simply put, our techniques and experiences in a group battle are different. First, Sasamiya; it's natural for the rear guard to support the vanguard, but there's also a role of suppressing the opposing team's rear guard. In the situation of a little while ago, if you had restrained my team's rear guard with your firepower, Amagiri, Toudou and Enfield should have been able to move a little more easily accordingly."

".....I see."

As she received a concrete indication, Saya nodded with a slightly surprised face.

"Next, Toudou; your 'conjoined cranes' is an excellent technique, but it isn't too suited to a team battle. Against an opponent with ability above a certain level, it'll take too much time for you to bring them down. If you can be fended off, like what I did a little while ago, there would be a lot of opponents who would be able to take advantage of that."

"Y-Yes.....!"

"Then, Riessfeld..... you were a little too reckless with me as your opponent. Or is it that? Did you make a light of me?"

"It's because I wanted to actually make sure of Sensei's ability."

Replied Julis, who had received Kyouko's piercing gaze head on.

Certainly, against a <Strega> who captured her opponent's ability and handled it as if it was her own, it might have been a somewhat careless attack. Even so, she would miss a chance if she hesitated about using her ability. Julis seemed to want to confirm in what way Kyouko's ability stealing was performed.

"Hahaha, you've some nerve. If that's the case, I'll overlook it this time. Next time, think a little more before using it."

Saying so, Kyouko moved her gaze to Ayato.

Amagiri, Frankly, I was surprised how good you sense of grasping your surrounding was. But, it's a little too good.

"Which means.....?"

“Of course, it’s necessary, in a team battle, to pay attention not only to the enemy before your eyes, but also to your teammates’ movement and the movement of the opponent’s rear guard. On that point, you pulled it off at a level that I had never seen..... But as a result, a hindrance is slightly reflected on your own action. Concretely speaking, you’re so caught in the surrounding situation that your judgment gets slightly dull. Even in the last rush, if it wasn’t because of that, your sword might have reached me first.

So, the state of “cognition” had partly backfired, huh.

He thought that it was the technique which could display the greatest effect in a team battle, but he should have thought about how to use it depending on the situation.

“For the time being, it’s roughly something like this — your individual coordination ain’t bad, so if you gain a little bit of experience, you’ll surely become more proficient.”

They were at a loss for words at the fact that she could raise points to be improved to this extent with only a short exchange of blows.

Should they say it was to be expected coming from the leader of a team which won a <Gryps> championship?

“Um, Sensei. Don’t you have anything to say about me?”

And, Claudia, the only one whose name was not called, softly raised her hand.

“.....As usual, you aren’t cute at all, eh. You performed so well it makes me sick.”

When Kyouko said so uninterestedly, she exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders.

“Besides, even while being restrained, you were vigilantly looking for an opportunity to prey upon me, weren’t you? Really, I couldn’t let my guard down.”

“Fufufu, unfortunately there wasn’t such an opening though.”

Claudia pleasantly laughed with her <Pan-Dora> set up as is.

As might be expected of an experienced person in team battle, Claudia seemed to be slightly more experienced than Ayato and company.

“If I had to say, in real combat, you should quickly use <Pan-Dora>’s ability without reserve. In so doing, you’d be able to breakthrough my puppets and even I wouldn’t be a match for both you and Amagiri.”

“Yes, I would have done so if this was the main battle.”

“What I’m trying to say is that you should use your ability without a second thought even if it’s the preliminaries. Cast aside the naïve thoughts of keeping it for the next tournament battle. The <Festa> isn’t so sweet, you know?”

“.....I will bear that in mind.”

Claudia laughed as she played it off with vague words. It seemed that she did not intend to follow the advice on that area.

“Humph.”

Kyouko said no more than that either and slightly snorted.

“Now then, based on the advice just now, shall we start the second round? I’ll say this just in case, but if you don’t do better, I’ll mercilessly kick your ass.”

And as she revealed a ferocious smile on her lips, she rotated the nail bat in her hand.

She said it jokingly, but she was probably serious. In other words, Kyouko was seriously facing them to that extent.

While inwardly giving his thanks to Kyouko, Ayato set up <Ser-Versta> at eye-level.

—Afterwards, the special training with Kyouko continued at a weekly pace^[6], and Ayato and company, who were initially toyed with due to the difference of experience, somehow became able to cope with Kyouko at the beginning of the summer vacation.

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“Err.....I wonder if it’s here.”

When he knocked at a door, which the number 7 was drawn on in large text, a space window appeared before Ayato’s eyes after a short while.

『.....Who is it?』

Saya’s face appeared on it, her cheeks and chin dirty with oil.

“Hi, Saya. How do you feel?”

『.....Ayato? Wait, I’ll open immediately.』

The door was opened as soon as she said that, and a room filled with large machines jumped into Ayato’s eyes. On the floor, cables, which one did not know to what they were connected to, were tossed around in bunch and one could not find anywhere to put one’s feet.

Only in the back corner was the sole empty space, and Saya, who was sitting there, greeted Ayato while turning only her neck.

“.....For you to expressly come to such a place, is something the matter?”

In the factory of the Meteoric Engineering Research Club located in the general training hall basement, many workshops, each as wide as a typical classroom, were lined up. This place was one of them.

⁶ more precisely a pace of once a week

A clubroom of a club was normally allocated in the extracurricular activities' block in the school building, but when it came to historical influential groups such as the Meteoric Engineering Research Club, it seemed that they were able to gain special concessions.

The fact that results and ability were favorably treated was the same both inside and outside the campus.

"No, it's because you seem to be quite concentrated on something recently. I came to see how you were doing."

"Oh, I'm thankful for your concern. Then, I'll take a small break."

When Ayato raised the bag of gifts that he brought, Saya happily smiled and put the spanner-like tool that she held in her hand on the floor.

Ayato also went towards Saya while being careful not to step on the cables.

"At any rate, this place is an amazing facility."

"Yes. Though as expected it looks inferior compared with my father's factory, even so it's quite impressive..... Oh, the popsicle; I missed it."

"Yes, I found it in a tuck shop of the middle school."

"As expected of Ayato. You know my tastes well."

Saya, after rummaging through the bag of gifts, that rustled as she did, took out a fruit-flavored popsicle and joyously bit into it.

It was midsummer outside. Seething heat plagued Asterisk today, too, but air conditioners operated at most places indoor. This workshop would also be no exception, but it seemed like the heat produced by the large machines exceeded it. Although not as hot as outside, it was hard to say that it was all that comfortable.

In fact, Saya wore only a tank top on her upper half, an outfit to which one was quite troubled about where to look.

".....So?"

"Eh?"

"Your business isn't only this gift, right?"

Saya, who promptly finished eating the first popsicle, thrust the second in front of Ayato.

".....As expected of you. You know me well, eh."

As he replied the same words Saya had previously said, Saya nodded with a smile as to say "of course".

After Ayato lightly scratched his head with a wry smile, he opened his mouth after taking a small breath.

“Well, how to put it..... there’s a small something I wanted to confirm.”

“Confirm?”

Saya tilted her head to the side with a blank face.

“The <Gryps> approached little by little and the practice is becoming harder. To be frank, even though that alone is tough, other than on training, aren’t you spending most of the time confined here to customize your luxes, Saya?”

“.....The end of the summer vacation is already close. If I don’t do this much..... no, to put it bluntly, it seems like I won’t make it in time at this rate, so it can’t be helped.”

“I know that, but..... Saya, look, you shouldn’t particularly have any reason to aim for the championship in the <Gryps>, right?”

“Ah..... So, you mean that.”

She clapped her hands as she just understood what Ayato meant.

This was because Saya’s reason for participating in team Enfield was because she wanted to be Ayato’s strength. It was not like she had a wish she wanted to be granted, like the other members including Ayato.

Though he was certainly thankful for her feelings, Ayato also felt sorry about that.

It was probably because it was similar to Ayato’s feelings of when he decided to participate in the <Phoenix>.

(I wonder whether Julis also felt like this.....)

However, Saya shook her head.

“You don’t need to worry about it, Ayato. The words I swore at that night aren’t lies.”

Upon hearing those words, Ayato recalled about what happened in Saya’s house when they stopped by on their way to Lieseltania.

『—That’s why, Ayato, I want you to rely on me when necessary. This time for sure, I’ll become your strength.』

Those were the words that Saya had said late at night while she looked up at Ayato as the shining moonlight trickled into the room.

“.....I see”

Saya’s eyes at that time were serious.

In that case, Ayato could no longer afford to say this and that.

“.....Besides, I don’t place that much trust in the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s power. There are also things that even those guys can’t do.”

“Well, that’s a given.”

It was a matter of fact that even the Integrated Enterprise Foundation was not God.

“In that case, for me, this is much more reliable.”

Then when Saya took the jacket of her uniform, that had been hung on a chair, she took out something like an amulet pouch from the inside pocket. She opened it and showed an old scrap of paper folded inside to Ayato.

“Ta-dah!”

“Eeeh? D-Don’t tell me that’s.....!”

Ayato unintentionally opened his eyes wide.

That was a『wish ticket』issued each time he had some sort of game with Saya when they were children. When this was used, one had to listen to a request of the other party per ticket — it was that kind of rule.

“So, you still had such an old thing, huh.”

“This is the last piece. It was fortunate that I hadn’t used it as it’d have been a waste. And, this ticket shouldn’t have had an expiration date. In other words—”

“.....Got it. It’s still valid.”

Ayato admitted it as he raised both hands (as if he’d given up).

Although they were trifling games when they were children, he couldn’t deny her that.

After all, Ayato and Saya were currently on an extension line of their pasts.

“What a relief..... But well, I don’t plan to use it now, so you may rest at ease, Ayato.”

“You don’t plan to use it? Why?”

When he asked, Saya smiled wryly, slightly forlorn.

“.....Because I don’t have the courage to do so.”

“Eh.....?”

Ayato wondered what she meant by that.

However, Saya returned to her usual expression and picked the spanner she had put on the floor.

“—Now then, end of the break. I must do my best again for a little while.”

And then, disregarding Ayato who was not quite satisfied with her implication, Saya resumed her lux’s customization.

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A blade cut into her chest.

A sharp pain, and the taste of blood welling up.

The flame blazing in the depth of her body became thin and weak, and she lost strength from her limbs. The heat was lost.

“.....My bad, president.”

Eishiro muttered in a low voice. A dagger in hand. It was not a lux.

His face could not be seen in backlighting. Was he laughing? Or, was he simply staring expressionlessly with cold eyes? This future her was supposed to have changed how Eishiro was used. She searched her mind..... Ah, it was no use. It was almost certainly a smile.

Her eyes got blurred and gradually became dark.

Her body became cold as if it had been soaked in ice.

It was painful.

It was frightening.

She understood that her death was imminent.

If she got used to it, she would somehow manage it? No way. There was no way that there was such a thing. Death is the fundamental fear. As if someone can get used to it. Infinite pain is only infinite hell.

She fell into darkness. She fell and was gone.

Then, Claudia abruptly woke up.

“.....It has been a long time since I have been killed by him, eh.”

She muttered so as she held on to the fading memory.

She wiped off the sweat damply concentrated on her forehead and then sat on the sofa there.

On the desk, there was a partially drunk coffee and a space window that had been left open. She seemed to have fallen asleep in the middle of work. The clock pointed at 3:00 a.m.

As she looked at her portable terminal, there seemed to have been a call. It was from not too long ago.

“.....Oh my”

Claudia smiled wryly as she saw the name displayed there.

Even so, she returned the call without hesitation.

『Gee, sorry to call you this late.』

A space window was immediately opened and Eishiro with a carefree smile was projected on it.

“No, no, I do not do mind it. So, what’s the matter?”

『Look here, it’s about the matter of the ABC’s newcomers that you asked me. I somehow manage it, so I tentatively want to inform you.』

“As expected of Yabuki-kun, you work quickly.”

When Claudia honestly praised him, Eishiro got unnaturally embarrassed.

『Well, if it’s a request from President, this much is no problem.』

“But, wouldn’t you better keep your distance with me soon?”

『Oops, what do you mean by that?』

Although the <Shadow star>, Seidoukan Academy’s espionage organization, could move on the student council president’s authority, it was originally under Galaxy’s direct control. In Claudia’s position now where she was trying to stir up trouble with Galaxy, it was difficult for her to use it like before.

Moreover, the matter of this time was Claudia’s personal business. If this was found out, not to mention Claudia, but Eishiro, who undertook it, would get in trouble as well.

“A notification came from the top, right? I wouldn’t have minded it even you had declined it.”

When Claudia indirectly inquired as such, Eishiro waved both his hands with his smile as is.

『You too know it, right President? That I’m a shadow even in the <Shadow star>. At this point, this much isn’t a big deal.』

“I see. Then, I shall thank you for your loyalty.”

Saying so, Claudia closed the space window.

Of course, Claudia was not stupid enough to blindly believe Eishiro’s words like that. Judging from his position, there was no doubt that he was connected with Galaxy’s top brass. Far from it, there was also a rumor that he was connected with another academy — more specifically, the <Tyrant> Dirk Eberwein of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

“.....Although, his favorite is again a different one.”

Well, at least for Claudia, it did not matter at this point.

A little more — just a little more and Claudia's wish would come true.

Her preparations were perfect, and the pieces have already begun to move.

And now Claudia..... team Enfield just had to win.

In doing so—

Chapter 02: <Gryps>

“Wow..... it really did change completely.”

When overlooking it from the Sirius Dome’s stands, it could be said that the stage was changed into something completely different.

First of all, the change, which caught one’s eyes first and foremost, was the deep trench like a canal surrounding the stage. The protection that Allekant developed was filled there, and now the stage became an island floating on a lake. It seemed that this protective gel unfolded to spread around the stage when a match is started.

Furthermore, the existing protective field was placed in addition to the protective gel. It was without doubt the perfect safety measure.

“Though it seems to be an upgrade in order to raise the audience’s safety, it is definitely overkill.”

Julis, standing next to Ayato, had an amazed face.

Kirin and Saya stood at the audience seating’s front row a little ahead, and were talking about something.

Though the opening ceremony of the <Gryps> was held today, the participating teams were given an opportunity to observe the upgraded hall before it began.

Therefore, the audience seating, which could originally accommodate about 100,000 people, was still almost empty and it looked strangely forlorn.

“Fufufu, it can’t be helped. After all, it seems that the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s top brass will come to watch matches in the next <Lindvolus>. It’d be a serious matter if they were to be hurt by any chance.”

“The top brass, is it? Hmm..... if that’s true, then I can understand this excessive prudence.”

“I hear that Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa succeeded in making them hold up the next “Great Conference (Concordia)” in this Asterisk. And by that flow, they seem to have considered watching the finals and participate to the ceremony.”

Speaking of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s top brass, it could be said that substantially they were the most influential people controlling the present world. They rarely appeared in public, but it was said that several representatives from each Integrated Enterprise Foundation branch attended a summit meeting called “Great Conference (Concordia)” which occurs in an interval of several years, and performed long term interest adjustments.

“The last time that they came over here was when Asterisk’s great renovation was over. If the meeting does occur [7], it’ll be the first time in about 40 years, huh. Of course, the members will be different from that time though.”

“Still..... is the Management Committee Chairman someone allowed to have that much influence?”

—The *<Festa>*’s current Management Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa.

As far as he heard a lot of stories — and even assuming the feeling where Ayato himself met him directly several times and talked with him, he (Madiath) did not give off any bad impression. Even the matter of Flora having been kidnapped and the matter of having found Haruka, he had he helped as best as he could.

However, Ayato did not forget the advice that he received from the Star Hunter Guard captain Helga Lindvall before.

『—Don’t trust Madiath Mesa too much.』

These words properly remained in Ayato’s heart even now.

“Let’s see. Speaking of position, Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa is only a middle-ranked executive of Galaxy. Judging from his origins/lineage, he shouldn’t expect any more promotion than this. Normally thinking, it is impossible for him to have anything to do with the site decision of the “Great Conference (Concordia)”, but.....”

Claudia slightly lowered her voice and answered Ayato’s question.

“The *<Festa>* holds an extremely special position even for the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. After all, it is the one and only event for which the six Integrated Enterprise Foundations jointly hold a meeting. Therefore, the members of the Steering Committee are temporarily transferred from each Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and the number of people is adjusted so as to become a constant ratio. I do not even need to explain how much advantageous it will be to produce the Management Committee Chairman among them, right?”

“In other words, he’ll be in an exceptionally strong position?”

“Although, it may also be said that he is in a position where his neck will be immediately cut off should any problem arise. The previous Management Committee Chairman seemed to have evaded such a situation due his political ability, but at least Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa has showed results with no room for criticism at the moment.”

“.....”

As expected, without doubt he seemed to be a quite able person.

⁷ speaking here of Madiath’s success in holding the Concordia

Be that as it may, there was still too little information to ascertain the human called Madiath Mesa.

“I am sorry to disturb you in the middle of your pleasant talk, but can I have a little of your time, ladies and gentlemen of the team Enfield?”

—And, a cool and familiar voice came from their rear.

St. Garrardsworth Academy’s students with a nimbus-shaped school badge, which was the symbol of order, stood behind them with an orderly appearance. Julis who saw it opened her eyes wide; Kirin and Saya responded with surprised faces, too.

“It’s been a while since the School Festival, eh, Fairclough-san.”

When Ayato said so and held out his right hand, the young man who was at the vanguard of that group — Ernest Fairclough, with a handsome face, shook the hand with a perfect smile, similar to Claudia’s.

“I am glad to see that you are looking well, Amagiri-kun.”

Ernest brought ten Garrardsworth’s students along with him.

Which means—

“Hello, Mr. <Holy Knight>. To show up with team Lancelot and team Tristan, that is quite extravagant of you.”

Claudia returned a similar smile and bowed as to greet the party.

Regarding the team Lancelot composed of the <Page One> from the rank #1 to rank #5, four people among them were the same members of the previous <Gryps> champion team.

Although team Tristan, composed of <Page One> from the rank #6 to rank #10, was commonly called the farm team/second string, when compared with team Lancelot. There should also be many other teams from Garrardsworth participating, but ability wise, those two teams stood out the most.

“What, there were people insisting of wanting to greeting you people by all means after all.”

At the same time as Ernest spun these words, a woman with roll gorgeous golden hair quietly stepped forward.

“Oh my..... It has been a long time, Laetitia.”

“Yes, really — it’s been quite a while.....! Tree years since that humiliation in the <Gryps>, an opportunity of revenge has finally come.....! I will win against you this time for sure, Claudia!”

That woman who turned a challenging gaze at Claudia was St. Garrardsworth Academy rank #2, Laetitia Blanchard also known as the <Witch of Light Wings>.

“Revenge? Weren’t you the ones that won that match?”

“This isn’t about the outcome of the match; it’s a problem of my personal pride!”

Claudia who dodged Laetitia while fickly laughing.

Taking a sidelong glance at her, Julis muttered as she was amazed.

“Haah..... Geez, they haven’t changed at all, these girls.....”

“Are you acquainted with her, too, Julis?”

When Ayato asked, Julis turned her eyes for an instant with folded arms.

Speaking of Garrardsworth, there were rumors only about Ernest; but the ability of Laetitia supporting him was not something to be underestimated at all. As far as he watched the match videos, as a <Strega>, she was probably among the five best in Asterisk.

“.....Like Claudia, I have met her many times at the Opera House Ball. She seems to be old acquaintance with Claudia, more than me, but even back then whenever they met each other, it’d always turn out like this. Laetitia seemed to hold some sort of rivalry towards Claudia.”

“Heeh, what should I say..... that sounds amazing.”

To think of competing with that Claudia, she was a woman with quite the fighting spirit.

“Apparently, the Blanchard House has a deep connection with the Enfield House and it continued until the present age, but.....”

“I can hear you, Julis.”

Laetitia intensely glared at Julis.

“I’ll tell this in advance, but it has nothing to do with our Houses. This is only a problem between me and Claudia.”

“Well, excuse me for that.”

Julis averted her gaze and ducked her head.

Judging from their exchanges, she seemed to have a friendly relationship than Ayato initially thought.

“And above all, as an old frien..... ahem! No, as an acquaintance, I cannot silently overlook you for trying to realize an absurd and foolish dream. I will smash it to smithereens without fail, so prepare yourself!”

Laetitia thrust a finger at Claudia and declared so.

(From her way of speaking now, does she know Claudia’s goal.....?)

Though Ayato and company have already heard about Claudia’s wish — they did not know yet anything after that — that is, they did not know what kind of vision she was trying to achieve.

If Laetitia knew it, she might have a closer connection with Claudia than what Julis said.

“Well whatever. In any case, if you are trying to win in the <Gryps>, then you will definitely fight against us. Though, if you were to trip up in the preliminaries, it will be an enjoyable show on its own.”

The matchups of the preliminaries — until the third round have already been announced, but because like in the <Phoenix>, it was arranged so that the prominent teams did not confront each other there; so at least until the fourth round, where the drawings would be held again, they would not encounter team Lancelot and team Tristan until then.

“—Is it fine already, Laetitia-senpai?”

What interrupted them was a voice Ayato too was familiar with.

“I am sorry, but you are not the only who swore for revenge.”

“Elliot.....”

Laetitia took a step backward with a reluctant face.

“It has been a while, Amagiri-san.”

Having greeted Ayato with a light smile was the <Shining Sword (Cláomh Solais^[8])> Elliot Forster who confronted Ayato in the previous <Phoenix>. He excelled at counter, and speaking of sword ability, he was a genius who emitted a vibe that could match Kirin.

Last time, Ayato purely had a clash of sword skill against sword skill with him without <Ser-Versta>, but Ayato was able to be barely overcome him.

But, that was last year.

“Wow..... looks like you’ve improved your skills quite a bit. If I’m not mistaken, you’re rank #6, right?”

Ayato, who saw Elliot’s figure up close after one year, could not hide his surprise at Elliot’s growth.

His fluffy curly hair was the same, but his features have matured quite a lot. Although the fact that his height was still somewhat shorter than Ayato to some degree was undeniable, one was able to perceive that his hands and feet which grew nimbly got flexible muscles even from over his uniform.

“No, I am still inexperienced. But.....I did not forget the humiliation of when my school badge was smashed by you.”

Elliot fearlessly smiled as he said so.

“At least, I intend to be diligent so as not to end up showing such an unsightly fight again.”

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cl%C3%A9omh_Solais

Contrary to his words, his eyes full of confidence, and the sharp sword essence that he could not hide blurred from within his body.

“.....Ayato-senpai”

“Yes. I know, Kirin-chan.”

To Kirin’s tense voice, Ayato gave a small nod.

Kirin probably felt the ability of the young boy in front of them. It was natural as she was a swordswoman herself.

That was how much the young boy in front of them kept it to himself.

“I think you will know how much I grew by crossing swords with me. I look forward to our match.”

Elliot who politely bowed stepped back to Ernest’s side.

“It is often said that defeat makes a person grow, but..... the current Elliot is a different person from that time, you know? I guess that I must thank you on that point, Amagiri-kun.”

Ernest happily put his hand on Elliot’s shoulder.

And.

“—Though, I too did not lose the feeling of crossing swords with you.”

He said that and smiled softly.

“Ayato, popular.”

Though he heard Saya’s muttering voice, Ayato, who was about to respond, noticed *<Ser-Versta>* slightly shaking on his waist.

“Oh dear.....”

Upon close inspection, the activation body of the ogre lux hung on Ernest’s waist — *<Lei-Glems>* was similarly shaking, too.

“This is.....”

“Fufufu, perhaps they may be expecting something, too. After all, it has been several years since the last time when the demon swords of the four colors have confronted like this.”

The Demon Swords of four colors pointed to the four ogre luxes *<Ser-Versta>*, *<Lei-Glems>*, *<Demon Sword of the Red Mist (Raksha Nada)>* and *<Demon Sword of the Blue Sound (Wole Sein)>*. But even in the long history of the *<Festa>*, there has never once been a precedent where all these ogre luxes got a wielder in the same period.

It was that currently, no one compatible with *<Wole Sein>* has appeared; and *<Raksha Nada>* was left in seal state.

“I heard that they were all made in the same laboratory. If that’s the case, then have they missed each other, or.....”

Ernest deliberately did not spin his words to the end, and clapped his hands as to change the topic. Such action, too, as expected was somehow similar to Claudia’s. The two were probably humans of the same type.

“Well then, I am sorry to have taken your time. Let’s mutually do our best, fair and square. See you later — preferably on the field of the battle.”

While seeing off Garrardsworth’s party leaving in perfect order, Claudia slightly laughed.

“You have it tough in a lot ways, huh, Ayato.”

Ayato could only return a wry smile to these words.

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“Though there is no need to say it now, the level of the <Festa> rises each time it is held up..... Ah, I will supplement just in case, but this is not something to look down on the past heroes. You may, to the bitter end, think of it as talk of a case when one based oneself on mean values such as physical data.”

The 24th <Gryps> opening ceremony.

Looking around at the participating students standing in a row, Madiath Mesa continued his speech.

In the newly renovated stage, like the <Phoenix> opening ceremony, students stood in a line representing each academy; the huge lighting installed on the dome’s ceiling lighted up the spotlight turned towards Madiath on the dais.

“In my personal opinion, for example anyone here would recognize that the Guard Captain Helga’s strength is something that has not dulled even now, right? But, even if comparing prana, which is one mean value, there is no doubt that you, ladies and gentlemen, who are gathered here now, are superior to the first generation in which she is categorized. This is clear even in terms of numerical value.”

As usual a calm voice, yet cheerful tone. Madiath’s speech somehow had something which attracted people.

The stands, which were empty until a while ago, were already tightly packed; and the gallery filling them up was carefully listening to Madiath’s speech while holding down their rampaging enthusiasm.

“Furthermore, the evolution of tactics and development of luxes are also remarkable. The Rectoluz released recently is the very symbol of that..... Well, that is a digression; just to tell you that I sometimes think ‘if only there was that in my active service period’. Well, whether or not I would have been able to handle it is a different matter though.”

To Madiath, who threw in a joke, the hall’s atmosphere suddenly loosened.

When looking up, the extra-large space screen unfolded in every direction of the lighting installation and projected Madiath's wry smile close-up.

"Speaking of which..... the committee chairman was the winner of a <Phoenix>, right?"

"Yes. What about it?"

As Ayato posed a question that suddenly came to mind to Julis, she replied in a low voice.

"No, I just wonder what kind of person his tag partner was."

"Hmm..... If I'm not mistaken, I remember that it was a woman; but I can't recall her name. After all, it's been quite a long time since I watched those match videos."

Julis put a finger on her temple and shut her eyes as she searched her mind.

"I see..... Thank you."

Even thinking about it in terms of age, it was probably before Ayato and company were born that Madiath had won the <Phoenix>. If it's the inquisitive minded Julis, then it was not strange that she had checked all of the matches of the past Phoenix Champions, but remembering all of them would be something stringent.

"Is there something bothering you about it?"

"No, that's not it, but"

After waving his hands to Julis, he once again returned his gaze to Madiath.

Even he did not know why such a thing came to his mind.

Such a question just popped into his head really suddenly.

—From the above-mentioned reasons, we judged that with the existing stage facilities as is, we might not keep up with the evolution of the <Festa> in the near future. So this time, although it was a slightly forced schedule, we have decided to perform a large-scale upgrade."

As Madiath made a short pause there, he turned his gaze to the audience seating.

"The installation of this protective gel raised the safety at the outside platforms without spoiling enthusiasm and excitement; and as a result a bolder and sterner freedom will be brought in the inside!"

His tone was tinged with enthusiasm, and the audience acted in concert with it.

As usual, Madiath's speech seemed to be well-received by the audience. Even among the students, there were those who snorted out as they were somewhat excited, maybe because they were affected by the feverish atmosphere.

Although, for Ayato, who already knew the behind-the-scenes circumstances of the stage upgrade, Madiath's charismatic words only sounded like sophistry. As expected, even the

student council presidents standing at the vanguard of each academy seemed to know those circumstances; thus Ernest and Fan XingLu had slightly cold expressions.

Ayato, too, while calmly gazing at Madiath, felt something like a strange sense of incongruity different from it.

He has heard Madiath's declamation here like this the last summer, too, but now he sometimes felt like he caught a glimpse of the eerie emptiness in there. Ayato could not help shivering at the fact that a strange, desolate space seemed to spread out on the backside of his attractive and clear-cut face.

It was not as if something has changed in Madiath's look.

If compelled to say it, what changed was probably the way Ayato saw Madiath.

Helga's warning seemed to root in him more deeply than he thought.

“.....Phew”

Be that as it may, he could not afford to worry about it now.

Ayato and company's first match would begin in the afternoon.

As Ayato took a short breath, he slightly shook his head as to shake off unnecessary thoughts.

—After the opening ceremony ended.

“Saya, I'll go buy some drinks. Can you tell this to everyone?”

“.....Yes, got it.”

As Ayato said along the way to the waiting room, Saya walking beside him nodded.

The other three girls were talking with gestures a little ahead of them.

“If Kirin's Iaidō^[9] was usable even in a group battle, it seems like we might be able to increase more pattern using it as the starting point.”

“I'm sorry, as expected I think that that'll be difficult unless it's just a one-on-one situation. It'll also take time for the set up.....”

“Restrictively, creating such a situation won't be impossible; but the fact that it'll take time with powerful enemies as opponents is fatal.”

Judging from the contents that he overheard, they apparently seemed to confirm the battle coordination. It would be bad to disturb them.

“Then while we're at it, can you also get one for me?”

⁹ 抜刀術 or Iaidō, please refer to this link for the meaning: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iaid%C5%8D>

“Got it. You’re fine with apple juice, right?”

“The Not from concentrated one.” [10]

“I got it.”

After giving a confirmation gesture by raising his hand, Ayato went to the vending machine section at a quick pace.

On his way, when he casually sneaked a look at the entrance, it was crowded with students who were gathered at the stage until a while ago. Though it was not necessary for Ayato and company to be also there as their match would be held here in this Sirius Dome, this was because students who had a match in other stages had to move there. Of course, there were also many students whose first match was not today, but tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

“Ayato-kun.”

Then suddenly, he heard a voice calling his name.

When he turned his gaze towards the familiar voice, a hand extended from a shade of a pillar beckoned to him.

“.....A student council president really has it tough, eh. Being summoned even though you don’t participate.”

As Ayato approached while smiling to her unexpected, childish action, the one there was Sylvia just as he expected.

They contacted each other several times after the School Festival, but it has been a long time since they met each other directly like this.

“Well, that’s my job after all. Of course I’ll come to the ceremony if my schedule is empty. And this time, it looks like even XingLu herself came instead of a representative.”

“Now that you mention it, someone did say that that person often sends in a representative frequently.”

Now that he thought about it, certainly Fan XingLu, whom he met in the School Festival, and the person, who was at World Dragon’s student council president seat at the time the <Phoenix>’s closing ceremony, were completely different persons.

“Even that child’s representative, judging from my sources, is a pretty famous person, too.”

¹⁰ wiki for from concentrate: Orange juice from concentrate is squeezed, pasteurized and filtered. Then it is evaporated to remove most of the water content. Some of the essences & oils extracted during that process may be added back to restore flavor prior to packaging and shipping.

For Not from concentrate: Orange juice that is not from concentrate is squeezed, pasteurized and filtered but at that point most of the large orange juice producers will put that orange juice into aseptic storage where the oxygen is stripped from the product and can be left for up to a year,

“Eh? Is that so?”

“The seventh prefecture 『Glaring Eye』^[11] of the Nine Offspring of the Dragon, organization under World Dragon Seventh Institute student council president’s direct control..... Well simply put, it’s about World Dragon’s Espionage Organization, but I heard that she’s one of its members.”

“.....She’s famous even though she’s an agent of an espionage organization?”

Wouldn’t it interfere with her work? Ayato wondered.

“Anyway, she isn’t a pupil of XingLu, but she seems quite favored by XingLu. I heard that both their personalities are quite similar.”

“Similar, which means.....”

“Yes, a battle maniac.”

If possible, Ayato did not want to approach her as much as possible.

“Ah, by the way Sylvie. It’s been bothering since a while ago, but why are you dressed like that?”

Sylvia’s outfit was her disguise, which he became completely familiar with.

When he caught sight of her figure at the opening ceremony a while ago, she was in her school uniform.

“I’m off duty from now on, so I thought about wandering aimlessly at the entertainment district area a little.”

That meant that she would probably go to look for clues of her “master” again.

“Tourists increase at the period of the <Festa>, so it’s easy to blend in among them..... Ah, of course, I’ll properly watch your match though, Ayato-kun.”

Sylvia lightly winked at him as she said so.

“Seems like it’d be exhausting then.”

“.....Hmm, speaking of usual, it was like that until then; but aren’t you taking it too lightly? Well, even I don’t think that Ayato-kun’s team will lose in the preliminaries, but you shouldn’t let your guard down in the <Gryps>, you know?”

Sylvia raised her index finger and approached her face.

“Y-Yes, I’ll bear it in mind. More importantly—”

¹¹ Here is the word in the raw: 『睡毗 (がいし)』 . がいし(Gaishi) means [Foreign Investment] which refer to the group not belong to the official ground, however the Kanji 睡毗 is read as [glaring eye]

While his heart skipped at her purple eyes which drew unexpectedly quite close, Ayato said as to play it off.

“Sylvia, too, you must be careful. Didn’t the number of times you slip out in incognito mode increase recently?”

“That’s..... Well, that’s right.”

Perhaps because it was bull’s eyes, considering it was Sylvia, she unusually let a muddy voice.

Though Ayato did not accompany her in all these outings, he heard a rough report. Recently — especially since summer vacation began, the number of times that Sylvia has slipped out incognito clearly increased.

Of course, her goal was to investigate the whereabouts of her master, Ursula Svento.

“Did you by any chance find any clue?”

However, Sylvia ruefully shook her head.

“No. Rather, it’s the opposite. That might be why I’m getting a little impatient.”

“I see.....”

Since she was aware that she was getting impatient, it did not seem necessary to be worried about her.

“But..... after thinking about various things, I’ve realized one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Judging from her way of speaking at that time, I think that Ursula is probably in a situation where she is manipulated by someone. At least, that wasn’t Ursula herself.”

Sylvia’s eyes increased their sharpness, and cold anger blurred from her words.

By “at that time”, Sylvia probably referred to the time when she came in contact with the person thought to be Ursula in the Grand Coliseum of the School Festival.

“But, it’d still be fine if it was an ability that takes control of a body; but I’ve never heard about an ability which interfered with someone’s memory and personality themselves. No, in the first place, such a thing is impossible with the scope of mana that <Strega> and <Dante> are able to handle.”

For abilities capable of mind interference, it was an established theory that the inhibition by prana was so taxing that the effect was weak on a <Genestella>.

“If such a thing was possible, then it’d be——”

“.....an Ogre Lux”

Sylvia nodded at the reply of Ayato who anticipated it.

“That’s just the most likely possibility though.”

Sylvie then sighed and dropped her shoulders.

“In the first place, no matter how much I investigate, such an ogre lux doesn’t seem to exist...”

The Ogre luxes’ development research was obviously classified, but by the treaty concluded between the Integrated Enterprise Foundations, the Ulm mana dites used for them (ogre luxes) were all numbered and managed. At the minimum, she came to know what were where.

“But, as a path to consider in order to get answers, that certainly seems to be the most plausible.”

The woman seeming like Ursula, although she temporarily interfered with <Ser-Versta>, she stopped its activation. It was not normal no matter how Ayato thought about it.

He did not know about the extent of the existence outside of the norm like XingLu or Ophelia Landlufen, but apart from them, it would be natural to see it as the power of Ogre Lux.

“Yes. Therefore, I intend to investigate that matter..... Ah, sorry! Even though you’ve a match soon, we’re talking about such distracting things. Ayato-kun, you must concentrate on the <Gryps>!”

“.....Yes, I know. But, you may contact me anytime if anything happens, okay?”

“Hahaha, thank you.”

Sylvia revealed a faint wry smile apologetically, but—

“.....Oh, that’s right. More importantly, I came today to give this to you.”

Suddenly, she took out something from her bag and held it out towards Ayato.

“This is?”

“Fufufu, a bento^[12].”

“.....Eh?”

Sylvia who smiled teasingly.

“Hey, I said it before, didn’t I? To look forward to it next time.”

Now that she mentioned it, when they talked about the topic of cooking during the School Festival, Ayato seemed to recall that she said something like that.....

“Then, are you saying that you’ve really made it? Expressly for me?”

^[12] Japanese box lunch

Even Ayato knew how busy Sylvia was.

If word got out that the world famous diva were to have spared her precious time for cooking a dish to a man, it would be something preposterous. Was this to be found out by Sylvia's fans, he would most likely be cursed by the fans for at least a hundred years.

"I may look like it, but I'm fairly confident about my cooking. Or, is it that you can't eat the cooking from a rival school student?"

"I-It's not like that.....!"

When Ayato took the lovelily wrapped lunch box, Sylvia smiled.

"Yes, good."

And when she slightly turned her face away, she hung her head down and leaked out a small sigh.

"Haah..... it was nerve-wracking."

"Sylvie?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing; nothing."

As Sylvia immediately turned towards Ayato, she waved her hands with her usual bright smile.

"If possible, I want you tell me your impression here though."

"Errr, that'll be a little....."

Ayato cautiously surveyed his surroundings.

Both Ayato and Sylvia were good at erasing their presences, so they were probably not noticed for now; but if Ayato were to open the box lunch here, he would attract attention. And that would be bad.

"Fufufu! It's a joke."

"Eh.....?"

Sylvia took one step back while unconcernedly laughing.

"Well then, I should go back soon. Do your best for your first match!"

"A-Ah, yes. Thank you."

Ayato saw off Sylvia, who went away towards the audience seating at a quick pace, while being still slightly dumbfounded.



*

The same time, Sirius Dome entrance — from the shade of a slightly distant vending machine.

Two girls have stiffened with their eyes wide opened.

After a short time, one of them finally opened her mouth.

“.....Hey, Tuulia.”

“.....What is it, Miluše?”

“.....Just now, did you see that?”

“.....Yes, I saw it.”

“.....That was..... Sylvia, right?”

“.....Without doubt, it was Sylvia.”

“.....”

“.....”

The two girls went silent once again; but before long when they rapidly looked at each other, they greatly exchanged a high five with smiles which mixed surprise with delight.

Chapter 03: Eccentric Girls

The Sirius Dome's waiting room in which he hasn't been in after a long time.

"Hohou..... I see. That again is a quite delicious-looking box lunch, huh."

".....When I was wondering why you were strangely late in coming back, geez."

The scornful eyes of Julis, who folded her arms, and Saya hurt his back.

Because he returned with a box lunch for some reason on top of being very late in coming back, he was prepared to receive at least one complaint, but..... after knowing that the box lunch was something that he's received from Sylvia, both girls' eyes became colder.

"Even though we will have a match soon, doing something that will affect teamwork is a problem, Ayato."

"Even if you tell me that....."

Even Claudia mildly admonished him.

However, that box lunch of Sylvia was actually so delicious as to make one's cheeks fall off.

Open sandwiches garnished with various spreads/ingredients such as smallish meatballs with herbs, potato salad, vegetables and smoke salmon on top. While simple, it was a lunch in which the time and labor set in all over shone.

The fact that she was confident in her cooking seemed to be true.

If one might speak of luxury, if he could eat it in a slightly more comfortable space, he would have been able to enjoy the taste more.

"U-Um, everyone, why don't we watch the TV? The teams' presentation seems to have just begun....."

As Kirin bravely tried to change such an atmosphere, she opened the space window that the waiting room was equipped with.

『.....With that said, I'm Yanase Miko, the ABC announcer assigned for the live coverage of this main stage this year, too! And for the commentary, Hiiragi Shizuna-san, an OG of Le Wolfe Black Institute and also the one currently acting as the first-class guard chief in the Star Hunter Guard, has been invited!』

Projected there was the female announcer whose face they were completely familiar with since last year's <Phoenix>.

『Thank you, I'll be in your care.』

On the other hand, the commentator seemed to be a different person from the <Phoenix>; the said person, a woman with cut and evened up black hair and sleepy eyes, bowed her head.

Claudia, who saw her, held her lips as she was slightly surprised.

“Oh my, this person..... if I’m not mistaken, she was one of Yatsuzaki-sensei’s teammates.”

“Eh!?”

That meant that this person was probably also a winner of the <Gryps>.

“A commentator is chosen among the people who’ve left excellent results in the past <Festas>. It isn’t that strange.”

“.....Then among them, might Sensei be invited, too?”

“It’s obviously different for people in active service and belonging to any of the six academies, right?”

To Saya’s innocent question, Julis answered as she was amazed.

It would certainly be as such when taking fairness/impartiality into consideration.

“But, this time, we were really indebted to Yatsuzaki-sensei. To repay that favor, we have to do our best.”

“—It goes without saying. It will be fine as long as we leave the same results as Ms. Yatsuzaki, right?”

Julis fearlessly twisted her lips at Claudia’s words.

They had Kyouko strictly coach them for team battles in these several months. Although, on top of the stock of Kyouko’s ability, it was not like she always held mock battles every time. Even so, when the summer ended, they were able to carry out team battles to the point where they suffered almost no defeats against Kyouko and her puppet team; so they produced plenty enough of results.

『.....Well then, Hiiragi-san. Though abrupt, I’ll rely on you for the prominent teams’ presentation and commentary of the current tournament.』

『First of all, the first favorites on the list are as expected the Silver Wings of Garrardsworth — especially their first team, Team Lancelot. With the <Holy Sword>’s wielder, the <Holy Knight> Ernest Fairclough-kun as its head, four among the five team members are members who played an active role in the last <Gryps>. The only new member, Perceval Gardner-san also known as the <Superior Knight (Agrestia)>, is also the wielder of the ogre lux <Holy Grail>. There is also data revealing that in Garrardsworth’s history, the team, which gathered both the <Holy Sword> and the <Holy Grail> has never missed a championship.』

『<Holy Sword> is the nickname of <Lei-Glems>, and <Holy Grail> is the nickname of the <Drill Horn of Atonement (Goat Amalthea)>. It's also the same for Player Laetitia Blanchard's nickname, which is <Holy Woman>, but there are many students of Garrardsworth who seem to be applied an alias.』

『It is probably their tradition. Now then, the two aforementioned ogre luxes are ones which are extremely difficult to defend against. In addition to this, since the other three team members, that is Player Blanchard, also known as <Witch of Light Wings>, the <Black Shield (Gareth)> and the <King Spear (Rhongomiant)>, are quite excellent as supports, it won't be an exaggeration to call it a rock-solid lineup.』

『In fact, no matter which odds you see, this Team Lancelot seems to be the overwhelmingly most popular.』

As expected, there seemed to be no mistaking it that Team Lancelot led by Ernest was the favorite among favorites.

『Well then, what about Team Tristan of the same Garrardsworth?』

『Unlike Team Lancelot, this team is peculiar in the fact that it is composed of new members.』

『Although it was the runner-up team of the previous tournament, most of the members who acted as the core have graduated after all. Isn't that area a cause for concern?』

『Even so, Elliot Forster-kun, also known as <Shining Sword (Cláomh Solais)>, who became Garrardsworth's rank #6 newly this year, is now considered to be an owner of sword skills next to Ernest Fairclough-kun; and the ability of the rank #7 Noel Mesmer-san, also known as <Witch of the Holy Thorn (Persefore)>, is very strong, too. It's a team with enough chances to aim for the championship, too.』

『I see, I see. As expected of Garrardsworth which boasts of the most victories in the <Gryps>. —Then, then, what about their antagonists?』

『The one whose name should be raised as their number one antagonist is Team Enfield of Seidoukan, I guess.』

“Wow! Our team's name is.....!”

“Well, that's a given, isn't it? Even looking objectively, there's no mistaking it that we are one of the favorites after all.”

In contrast to the surprised Kirin, Claudia smiled with a face as to say that it was a matter of fact.

Certainly even looking at only ranks, with the new and old ranks #1, the rank #2 and the rank #5 gathered in the same team, there was no doubt that they would attract the public's eye whether they wanted it or not. Moreover, there were also two ogre luxes namely <Ser-Versta> and <Pan-Dora>.

『After all, there are members of the <Phoenix>'s winner tag and a tag of the best four; with that alone, anyone can understand how powerful a team it is. The remaining member, Claudia Enfield-san, also known as the <Master of Thousand Eyes>, is the wielder of the ogre lux <Pan-Dora>, which has the ability of future foresight, and is rank #2. It's one of the few teams which can stand up to Garrardsworth's two teams with a well-coordinated strength.』

『Hohou!』

『Also, although I don't know his name, the best disciple of the World Dragon's Team Yellow Dragon, whose participation in the <Festa> has finally been allowed by that <Divine Revelation>, has his name entered in the <Gryps>. One can easily anticipate that he's a very powerful person.』

『You're speaking of World Dragon's rank #2, contender Woo Xiao Fay, right? Like <Divine Revelations> Fan XingLu-san, he's a contender who has almost never come out in public until now; but his activity in this tournament is greatly anticipated.』

『The other members are also the last <Phoenix>'s winner tag, <Tenka Musou> Zhao HuFeng-kun and <Raigeki Senka> Cecily Wong-san, and the very strong team of the Li siblings who participated actively in this year's <Phoenix>. In the first place, considering that "Yellow Dragon" is a team name which can't be used unless <Divine Revelations> deems the team worthy of being World Dragon's representative, no one will say otherwise even if I nominate them as one of the favorites, right?』

Team Yellow Dragon members' faces were projected on the terminal screen. Among them, there were three faces that Ayato and company knew, and they have also already seen the wavy long-haired woman's face in match videos; but only the man with a clear-cut and fearless face were they not familiar with.

“This person is the <Hagun Star>, huh.....”

“Yes. There is almost no useful data about him. Were we to clash against them, I just hope that he will reveal the scope of his strength to some extent before that.”

He was that XingLu's best disciple, so he was probably a very strong person as the commentator said.

“Cecily Wong and Zhao HuFeng can’t be taken lightly, too. To be frank, if those two had formed a tag and participated in this <Phoenix>, I don’t know whether we’d have been able to win the <Phoenix>.”

Julis suddenly tightened the grip of her hands joined together while keeping her gaze at the space window with a serious expression.

HuFeng’s strength that Ayato witnessed in the school festival was the real deal; it might be said that on the Taijutsu side in particular, he overwhelmed Ayato.

On the other hand, Cecily was also a master of Star Senjutsu and Julis, who was a <Strega>, seemed to be quite concerned about her. As far as she watched from several of Cecil’s match videos, Cecily seemed to excel at Star Senjutsu of the lightning system; but her Taijutsu too could not be taken lightly.

“Those nasty twins too will surely be the same as when we fought them in the <Phoenix>. And above all, their abilities are extremely effective in group battles.”

The Star Senjutsu, which Li ShenYun excelled at, could show that which does not exist as if it was there; and the Star Senjutsu, which Li ShenHua excelled at, could display something existing as if it was not there. Certainly, bewitching abilities of that kind should work more effectively in team battles than in tag battles.

“Quite troublesome.”

“.....Indeed.”

Saya and Kirin agreed to it, too.

『In the meaning of dark horse, we can’t overlook Team Rusalka of Queen Veil. Whether or not the strength, with which they won through until the best eight the last time despite being their first participation, was the real deal, it’s something I want to by all means ascertain.』

『All the members of Rusalka are busy with their activity as a rock band, and it doesn’t seem like they have been recorded fighting since the last <Gryps>. I, too, as an OG of the same academy, really look forward to seeing how much they have grown up!』

“.....As for me, I hope that they have not grown up that much.”

To the words of the high-spirited Miko, Claudia put a hand on her cheek with a troubled face.

“You’ve been strangely concerned about these girls since before. Honestly, it doesn’t look to me like a team which you should be so much cautious of though..... at least I don’t think of them as a threat on the same level as those mentioned so far.”

Ayato and company have also checked the favorite teams’ match videos as much as possible. Since they were in the last <Gryps>’s best 8, there was no doubt that Rusalka was

also a strong enemy. But even taking their growth into account, as Julis said, Ayato too somehow doubted whether they could be put on the same level as Garrardsworth and World Dragon.

“At least regarding individual fighting strength, the one we must absolutely pay attention to is definitely the rank #3 Miluše.”

Even if their matches data as a team were only the ones of the last <Gryps>, this year’s data of the Official Ranking Battles appeared on the market. There, Rusalka’s members were defeated by Sylvia in a quite one-sidedly development. As long as this was not faked, one could guess their current specs to some extent.

“Does it mean that, even if their individual strength isn’t that high, their combination as a team is quite outstanding?”

Kirin nervously raised her hand, but Claudia slowly shook her head.

“Well, there is that, too; but rather than those girls themselves, my concern is—”

“Their ogre luxes.”

As if continuing Claudia’s words, Saya muttered.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Hmm..... was it called <Lyre-Poros>?”

Team Rusalka was famous in using musical instrument type weapons. It seemed that the ogre lux with the name of <Lyre-Poros> was originally one Ulm mana dite divided into five. Therefore, it was an extremely inconvenient ogre lux that could not even activate unless five users with high compatibility ratings appeared. In other words, Rusalka used one ogre lux with five people.

Ayato opened his own space window and checked Rusalka’s data.

Miluše used the guitar-type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Calliope>, Päivi used the floating drum-type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Erato>, Monica used the bass-type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Melpomene>, Tuulia used the guitar-type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Polyhymnia>, and Mahulena used the space projection keyboard-type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Thalia>^[13]. All of them were strangely complex names.

“Judging from the video recordings, they are ogre luxes which manipulates sound, but.....”

As they attacked with the vibration of sound waves and created sound barriers in the last <Gryps>, they displayed abilities which matched with their (outward) appearances. Although, prior to Rusalka, it seemed that wielders of these ogre luxes have never been gathered, there was little information about them accordingly, too.

“.....”

¹³ here is a reference for the ogre luxes’ names: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melpomene>

Then, Claudia was pondering with a serious expression.

“Claudia?”

“.....No, I’m sorry. Well, there is no point in sparing too much time on a team that we are not yet sure that we will clash against. Let’s switch over.”

“Ah, yes.....”

It wasn’t like he wasn’t concerned about an ogre lux that Claudia was that concerned with so far, but it would certainly be no problem after it was settled that they would confront them.

『Oh, yes! Speaking of Queen Veil, there are also interesting teams such as Team Merveille and Team Kaguya, so it’s an academy I’d by all means like you to pay attention to in this tournament. Especially.....』

The topic of the live reporter and commentator has already moved to the topic of different teams.

“Team Kaguya, huh.”

“What about that team?”

Julis turned a wondering face to Ayato’s casual mutter.

“Ah, no, it’s just that I’ve an acquaintance there.”

“.....An acquaintance in Queen Veil, you say? Other than Sylvia Lyyneheym?”

Julis’ eyes became once again severe, and the other members’ gazes gathered on him, too.

“Oops”, when he thought so, it was already late.

“I have also checked about Team Kaguya, but it is the first time I hear that there is a person like that. What kind of person is she?”

Claudia, who smiled, quickly cut in.

Though it was her usual smile, it let you feel a somehow strong pressure.

“No, it’s really just an acquaintance..... Renjouji Yuzuhi, she is a disciple in my house.”

“A disciple? does this mean that she is a user of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style?”

Kirin opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Although that’s true, it’s the branch family’s dojo that that girl attended. Saya, you know it, right? The Yatsuka’s one.”

“.....Oh, the one of archery.”

To Ayato’s words, Saya clapped her hands as she recalled.

“Do you know her too, Saya?”

“.....No, I’ve just heard that there was such a dojo. It seemed that Ayato’s father and Haru-ne occasionally showed up there though.”

“Because for some reason, I don’t seem to be suited for archery, I don’t have that much connection with that dojo. That’s why I’ve met Renjouji-chan only several times when we were children. But.....”

As Ayato said up to there, he knitted his brows as he was troubled.

“Unlike me, Renjouji-chan’s bow skill is first-class. It was the case even in those days, so just thinking about how much she’s improved so far makes me shiver.”

“So it’s to the extent of making you say that much, huh.....”

Julis too knitted her eyebrows deeper like Ayato.

“I see..... Honestly, I thought that Sofia Fairclough was the only person we should pay attention to in Team Kaguya, but it looks like I will have to revise my thought.”

“Fairclough?don’t tell that she’s Ernest-san’s?”

This time, it was Ayato’s turn to be surprised.

“Yes, she is his little sister. She is a talented girl to the extent that it’s said that her skill with a sword either equals that of the <Holy Knight>, who is her big brother..... or maybe even surpassed it. But, she has one big weakness.....”

“—Wait a minute.”

Saya raised her right hand as to interrupt Claudia’s words.

Her face looked downward, and she put her left hand over her eyes as if suppressing a headache.

“No matter how you put it, I can’t memorize everything. Impossible for me.”

Though it was obvious for class, Saya’s head did not work that much on things she was not interested in.

“It is said that this year’s <Gryps> has many prominent teams, which is a rare bumper crop in these recent years after all.”

Claudia said so and gently struck Saya’s head.

“Well, I have roughly grasped the necessary information, so there won’t be any problem even if I have all of you memorized it after the opponent has been decided.”

“T-Thanks.....”

Kirin stroked her chest as she heaved a sigh of relief.

『Besides, I'd heard that Team Androcles of Allekant will make their entry with a new weapon, although not yet announced, in their hands. As this is again a new model armament different from the Rectoluz, I'm really looking forward to seeing its debut. Then, my alma mater Le Wolfe has invited Team Hellion from HRMS, which is a major PMC, as mercenaries. There's also the information that they, whom President Riberio Pareto personally selected, received that ogre lux, <Wicked Sword of Hollow Thirst (Bershe-Vern)>—』

Though the commentary still continued the teams' presentation in the space window, Claudia closed it and said as she looked at Ayato and company's faces.

“Now then, let's once again make a review of our opponent for the first match.”

*

—At the same time, Canopus Dome.

“Urgent meeting! The『what should we do to oust/bring down Sylvia Lyynehey?』meeting~!”

Shifting from Sirius Dome to Canopus Dome, which was the hall of the first match; as soon as she entered the waiting room, Miluše exultantly declared so.

“.....Um, what are you saying all of a sudden?”

Though one could see that she was somewhat restless from her movements, when Mahulena asked so nervously, Miluše puffed up her chest as though she was waiting for it.

“Fufufu! Hear and be surprised! Unexpectedly—!”

“We have witnessed a scene where that Sylvia had a secret rendezvous with a man!”

But, Tuulia, who cut in while Miluše was putting on airs, smugly preceded.

“Eeeeeh!?”

The remaining Rusalka members — Päivi, Monica and Mahulena raised voices of surprise all together, but.....

“Ah! Hey Tuulia, it's unfair! Even though I was going to say it!”

“Ehem, in things like this, it's the faster one who wins!”

“Unfair! Unfair, unfair, unfair!”

To Miluše, who protested while swinging her arms around, Tuulia lightly ran around.

“Hey, hey, don't gambol^[14] around, explain it properly! Is it..... really true?”

^[14] jump or run around playfully

Monica half rose to her feet impatiently and questioned the two girls again.

“It’s true, it’s true, it’s a great scoop, right?”

“I’d also properly recorded it in video~.”

As Miluše said so and operated her portable terminal, the video, which she indeed took secretly, was replayed there.

Because they were far away, the voices could be heard only fragmentarily, but a man and a woman were intimately exchanging a conversation in the shade of a big pillar.

“That’s..... certainly Sylvia, yup.”

“There’s no doubt”, Päivi, who was watching the video intently, greatly nodded.

Although it was hard to tell at a glance as Sylvia disguised herself as always, it actually looked like her even to Mahulena.

“Right, right, right~?”

“Moreover, hey look here!”

In the scene that Tuulia pointed at, Sylvia was handing something over to the man.

“This is..... I wonder what on earth it is.”

“Listen carefully.....”

Receiving a wink from Tuulia, Miluše raised the volume of the video.

What was heard mixed with noises was—

“By any chance..... is it said box lunch?”

“Spot on!”

After having made a high-five happily, Miluše and Tuulia looked together at Monica as to confirm.

“With this, no matter where we sell it, it won’t be said to be faked information, right Monica?”

“.....Yes, with this, we can bring this up in the general net news, let alone the academy’s pro-media club..... Fufufufufu! Amazing! Amazing, amazing, amazing! It’ll without doubt make a great scandal! See? You can do it when you want, leader!”

Monica, who forgot her usual persona, twisted her lips quite nastily and resolutely took a guts pose.

“Y-Yes, thank you.....”

Miluše slightly pulled back as she was overwhelmed by Monica’s vigor and tension.



“.....Huh?”

Päivi, who was watching the video all along, suddenly tilted her head to the side.

“This man..... isn’t he perhaps <Murakumo>?”

“Eh.....?”

At her words, all the members, including Mahulena, gathered again before the space window.

“Now that you mentioned it, we were preoccupied with only Sylvia, but this uniform is..... Seidoukan’s, right?”

“I-It’s true! This person is that Amagiri Ayato-san!”

They wondered why they did not realize it.

Speaking of Seidoukan Academy’s rank #1, Amagiri Ayato also known as <Murakumo>; he was now a top class celebrity in Asterisk, too. In the last year’s <Phoenix> final, his fight against Allekant’s autonomous puppets was talked about among the <Festa> lovers.

“.....Wow, an unexpected big shot came out. Then, the person whom she was on a da-da-date with during the School Festival, don’t tell it was.....!”

“With this, it really will become a big scandal.....!”

At that time when Miluše tightly grasped her fist at the idea of having done it.

“Uyuyuh.....? But, hold on, hold on.”

Monica, who returned to playing the hypocrite, took out a stuffed toy-shaped portal terminal from her breast pocket.

“Hey, hey, look here.”

What Monica projected on the space window — by the way, Monica has also cutely decorated the design of the space window — was a so-called gossip site. Monica picked up some articles with familiar hands. The headlines were『<Murakumo>’s ardent love! His partner^[15] is that Princess!』, 『The <Phoenix>’s winner tag also partners in private life!』, 『That <Murakumo> accompanies Her Highness Riessfeld in her triumphal return to her country!』 and the like.....

“As you see, there’s a rumor that Amagiri Ayato-kun’s partner/lover is that <Glühen Rose>^[16], you know?”

“.....Can we trust this?”

¹⁵ as in girlfriend

¹⁶ from here, I’ll now use <Glühen Rose> instead of <Petalblaze Witch> like in the anime

They thought that those were all blatantly lascivious articles whose credibility was doubtful.

“Who knows? But the Princess having returned to her country at the end of last year is true, and it’s also true that <Murakumo> accompanied her. That was also brought up in the general news after all. Be-si-des.....”

When Monica said up to there, she put a hand on her lips and giggled.

“Because the stimulation will be strong for you leaders, I didn’t project it here, but there is also a mooore indecent article, you know?”

“.....Indecent, you say?”

“Such as a love triangle, or a love square or a love pentagon..... Come on, <Murakumo> is also taking part in the <Gryps>, but in that team, all the other members are girls, right? So, there’s a rumor whether he has a good relationship with those girls.....”

“N-No way, such a thing.....”

Although Mahulena unintentionally blushed, Miluše and Tuulia looked puzzled even after hearing it^[17].

“E-Err..... what do you mean?”

“.....As innocent as always, huh, those two.”

Päivi muttered so.

“E-Errr, it means that, umAmagiri-san’s partner might not be only Sylvia-san.....”

Though she said it in such a vague way because she didn’t know how to explain it, Miluše, after tilting her head to the right and then to the left, suddenly raised her face as she realized the meaning.

“In other words, Sylvia may be being deceived by <Murakumo>!?”

“W-What did you say!? Damn <Mu-Murakumo>.....! What a terrible bastard!”

Tuulia’s face also dyed in anger and she struck a fist against the palm of her hand.

Though she transmitted what should be transmitted, Mahulena felt light dizziness in their too simplistic thinking.

“N-No, um, you know, I’ll tell you in advance, but that too is only a rumor, so it isn’t yet sure it’s that way.....”

Mahulena tried to soothe them, but the two girls did not listen to her at all.

—And.

¹⁷ meaning that they didn’t understand the implied meaning

“Gununuh.....! It can’t be helped, let’s temporarily suspend this plan for the time being!”

“Eh.....? B-By that, do you mean that we should stop spreading this information?”

As Mahulena blinked her eyes with surprise to the sudden decision, Miluše nodded as if it was quite natural.

“Obviously! After all, like that I’d feel sorry for Sylvia!”

“.....Weren’t you thinking about a strategy to bring Sylvia-san down just a moment ago?”

“That is that, and this is this!”

As expected even Mahulena retorted, but Miluše flatly declared as such.

“Well, now that it’s come to this, it’s a little..... it kind of feels awkward, eh.”

“It can’t be helped, huh.”

“Eeeh? Geez, leader, really you’re too soft.”

The other members, too — although only Monica seemed slightly disappointed — did not seem to have any objections.

Mahulena felt like she wanted to hold her head, but at the same time, she felt herself slightly relieved.

Now, she strongly felt it.

That these girls were not bad people at heart, too.

But — they were just slightly weak-minded.

“With that said, change of plans!”

“Eh?”

“Let’s temporarily set Sylvia aside, and investigate about <Murakumo>!”

“Eeeeeh!?”

To a sudden declaration again, Mahulena raised a voice of surprise.

“H-How did it turn out like this? N-No, in the first place, what are you planning to do after investigating about Amagiri-san?”

“If <Murakumo> is really, like the rumors say, an extremely sh-shameless guy, we’ll give him judgment by kicking his ass. If she were to see such an uncool side of him, Sylvia will probably wake up, too; and then we can again resume our plan to bring her down without hesitation.”

“.....”

Mahulena was at a loss for words before her logic which seemed to make sense and yet was grandly derailed.

“I see.....!”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Well, I also don’t want Monica to play the villain’s part.”

Moreover, the other members approved of it as expected.

“B-But, you know? Even in the case that these rumors are true, how on earth will we.....?”

“Fufufu, Mahulena is really bad at thinking, huh.”

“Haa.....”

Miluše, who shook her index finger with a cool-looking pose, was brimming with self-confidence more than ever.

“<Murakumo> is also participating in the <Gryps> like us. In that case, we should clash against each other somewhere!”

Though she was about to ask whether she didn’t also think of the possibility of them losing before that, Mahulena managed to swallow it.

It would be no use whatever she said at this late hour, and in fact Team Enfield of Amagiri Ayato was one of the favorites. At least, they would definitely win through until the main battle.

And then, Mahulena knew it.

—That this Team Rusalka likewise had the strength of being able to easily make it to the main battle, too.

Chapter 04: Starting People

『—It's finally the first match of the K block! From the east gate Seidoukan Academy's Team Enfield makes their entrance!』

When the entrance gate's door, which was renovated, opened, cheers fanned by Miko's excited voice rattlingly shook the air.

Before, the pathway of the interior connected directly to the stage, but now, because a trench for the protective gel was made, the entrance itself has greatly changed. First, the hatch of the protective gel under water opened, and then a huge pillar-shaped entrance gate gradually rose from there up to the same height as the audience seating. Afterwards, it was a really large-scale mechanism where a semi-transparent path extended up to the sky stage in the air when players appeared from the inside of the pillar.

As Claudia advanced through that path at the vanguard, Julis spat out with a dumbfounded face.

“There will be no use even if I say it now, but..... I see that this tournament devoted itself to useless performances as always.”

“Fufufu, we have no choice but to come to terms with the fact that that's how it is.”

On the other hand, Claudia, who walked in front, responded to the cheers by waving her hand in a completely familiar way

“B-But, this is a little..... embarrassing.”

Kirin, not seeming to be able to adapt constitutionally, either, hung her head down with a bright red face.

“.....I don't care either way, so I want to return quickly and continued my work.”

It seems that in the end, Saya did not make it in time for this first match with her lux remodeling. Though she said that she wanted to get it over with by the main battle, she seemed to run fairly into difficulties.

When turning a fleeting glance to the rear, many huge space screens were unfolded around the entrance gate and an image of Seidoukan's school badges and players' presentation were broadcast on them. This was certainly quite embarrassing.

When they arrived at the end of the path, where the stairs began, and went down those stairs to the stage where the six academies' school badges were drawn, their opponent team for the first match was going to appear from the opposite entrance gate just at that time.

『And, and! Challenging this Team Enfield, which is one of the favorites, is Le Wolfe Black Institute's Team Black Venom!』

『If this Team Black Venom wins, it'll truly be the most spectacular victory, but how will it be.....』

With their uniforms, which has been remodeled to the extent that any part of the original (uniform) hardly remained, countless tattoos painted on their exposed skins and their individual hairstyles — five male students dressed like typical Le Wolfe students turned provocative gazes to Ayato and company.

There were varied expressions such as those, who glared as to intimidate, and also those who laughed frivolously; but they obviously had a bad attitude. All of them have already deployed their luxes, and those were all long-range weapons such as assault rifle type luxes.

“.....I've heard that it was a mish-mash of hoodlums, but it's more than I imagined.”

As she recalled their previous meeting, Saya muttered as such.

From what Claudia had said, they were all outside the list. As such, there was hardly any data about them, too. Although among the six academies, Le Wolfe was the academy where the replacement of ranks was the most intense, she could grasp their (hoodlums) rough ability when facing them like this. —Honestly, she did not think that they were that much of a threat.

“There are many people of this kind who misunderstand the <Gryps> comparing it to the other <Festas> after all.”

Julis made a somewhat fed up expression.

“Misunderstand?”

“As the <Gryps> is for team battles, the hurdle for participation is high..... At the same time, as you know, it's also the <Festa> with the most surprises/unexpected results. In other words, many people participate in it by gathering the required number of people so as to aim for victory even by a fluke.”

“I see.....”

“Only, it's something one understands by actually watching a match, but most teams, which raised a giant killing, exerted great efforts accordingly. That is, hauling in the moment when they have cleared/jumped over the ability difference. The <Festa> isn't something so sweet that hooligans, with foolish thoughts such as ‘it's natural that we'd lose; if we can luckily pick up a victory, then we gradually can' and like, win.’”

Julis resolutely cut off there.

Then.

“Hehehe..... Yo, <Glühen Röse>. I didn’t think we’d meet you guys again in such a place.....”

The Mohawk-haired man, whose school badge faintly radiated as proof of team leader, stepped forward and said so with a stiffened face.

“.....Hmm?”

After Julis intently stared at his face for a while—

“Who are you?”

She tilted her head to the side with a puzzled expression.

“Wha!? You bitch, you don’t remember me?!”

Perhaps because it was quite a humiliation, the enraged Mohawk-haired man’s face dyed red.

But, Ayato, who was watching their exchanges from the side remembered earlier than Julis.

“Ah.....! Look, he’s the one from when I had Julis guide me around the town before.....”

When Ayato had just come to Asterisk, he had asked Julis to show him around the central district. He was probably a Le Wolfe student who was hired by Silas Norman, who was aiming at Julis at that time, and attacked them in the form of rolling them up in a scuffle then.

“.....Ah, those hoodlums who were tricked by Silas Norman and attacked us, huh.”

Julis seemed to more or less remember it, but she didn’t seem to be that interested in it.

However, it seemed to be different for the other party.

“Damn, messing around with me!H-Hmph! But, well never mind. I didn’t think that I could have a golden opportunity to get back at you from that time in this tournament, which I participated in just for fun. From the start, we didn’t think we could win, but we’ll take at least even you alone along with us in our fall. So prepare yourself.....!”

When the Mohawk-haired man spitted as he said so, he turned back and returned to his match start position.

“.....”

Though Julis remained silent as is with cool eyes, she glanced at Claudia.

Claudia, who received her glance, smiled and nodded.

『Well then, the filling of the protective gel has begun, too, and the match start time finally approaches! Now then, will an unexpected result occur?!』

As the match was about to begin, the protective gel welled up from the trench, gradually surrounding the whole stage. The protective gel was a photo-curing type liquid resin, and its surface was solidified by means of laser irradiation. It covered up entirely the surroundings without spilling over even when exceeding the stage's wall.

Naturally, the sound was isolated in the inside and outside; but because there was a built-in speaker on the stage's wall, live report, commentary and cheers could be heard with almost no sense of incongruity.

The protective gel, which appeared slightly bluish during the filling, visibly turned transparent.

“<Gryps> K Block first match, battle start!”

And when the mechanical voice announced the match start, the members of Black Venom all turned their gun muzzles only towards Julis alone—

“Oraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Along with a roar, they suddenly changed their target to Claudia who was the team leader.

A storm of light bullets shot from five luxes attacked Claudia, and a dense cloud of dust filled the surroundings.

“Hahahaha! How is this?! According to the rumors, it seems that <Pan-Dora> has the ability of future foresight; but there’s no way you’ll be able to deal with a saturation attack, right?!”

The Mohawk-haired man, who’d set the surprise attack, laughed somewhat excitedly.

It looked like he was convinced of their victory.

—But, as Julis had said, the <Festa> was not that sweet.

“Your idea wasn’t bad..... but, your bluff from the start was too obvious.”

“Well, it was that plain after all.”

“Wha.....?!”

The cloud of dust cleared away, the face of the Mohawk-haired man, who saw the figures of Ayato and Julis standing so as to protect Claudia, was distorted with shock.

Ayato used <Ser-Versta> as a shield, Julis deployed the Great Crimson Heart Blazing Shield (Anthurium), both of them guarding Claudia.

“D-Damn!”

The Mohawk-haired man and his teammates hurriedly set up their luxes again, but it was already late.

“—Here I come!”

At that time, Kirin, who drew out Senbakiri jumped into their chests.

A silver sword flash shone; the school badges of the dread-haired big man and the man with a snake tattoo on his bald head were cut off at the same time.

“Y-You brat!”

Although the obese-like big man, who took up position in the very rear, tried to contain Kirin by firing the heavy machine gun type lux which he held in both hands, the silver-haired girl easily evaded the gunfire and then cut the school badge of the tall man with ruffled hair.

“Guuuuuuh! J-Just stay still.....!”

The obese-like big man swung his heavy machine gun around to somehow catch Kirin, but the barrage of light bullets which were scattered did not even graze her.

“H-Hey! Rather than that little girl, first the leader—”

“.....Kaboom”

The light of the Type 39 Lux Laser Cannon Wolfdora that Saya fired grazed the side of the Mohawk-haired man who shouted while running away to take distance from Kirin.

“___”

The obese-like big man who was swallowed by the whirlpool of light was flung against the stage's wall along with a scream as is. The sound of a heavy, dull shock resounded and the big man, who was buried like he was crucified to the wall, in which cracks ran through the length and breadth, seemed to have already lost consciousness.

“.....So?”

“Hiii!?”

The tip of <Pan-Dora> was thrust at the neck of the Mohawk-haired man in a dumbfounded sorry state who gapeingly opened his mouth.

“The leader..... what?”

As Claudia said so with a refreshing smile, the Mohawk-haired man announced that he gave up while sinking down to the floor as he was unable to stand up due to fear.

*

“I'm sorry, please look here, too!”

“Eh, then I'd like to ask player Toudou, but by how much have you narrowed down the targets when you attacked at the very beginning.....”

Before the passage leading to the waiting room, a place with a space slightly wider than others was the interview space where the winner interview was held. An official press

conference room furnished with a table and chairs was often used after entering the main battles, but in the qualifiers, unless in some really special circumstances, it was done briefly in this place.

Even so, if it was two people like in the <Phoenix>, it would not take that much time, too; but it was five people in the <Gryps>. In addition, due to the fact that Ayato and company were one of the favorites, there were many reporters who'd gathered.

“I think that you know that your team is considered to be one of the favorites in this tournament, but judging from you, player Amagiri, which are the teams that you regard as strong opponents, and the teams that you think it seems they will become you guys’ rivals?”

“Errr, well..... As expected, I think that Garrardsworth’s Team Lancelot and Team Tristan are strong opponents.”

“Speaking of player Sasamiya, the numerous original luxes that you used in the <Phoenix> became a hot topic; but have you prepared any new luxes this time, too?”

“.....Secret”

Actually, one wondered whether they would be held back by this and that for nearly 20 minutes in such a way.

“.....”

Julis, already seeming to be quite fed up with it, plainly revealed a displeased expression.

“I’m sorry, everyone. May we already end this as such?”

In that timing, Claudia mildly declared putting an end to the interview.

“U-Um, then can I ask one last question?”

A hand was suddenly raised from the back of the crowd of reporters, and a slender young female reporter leaned forward. There was the mark of ABC on the press card hung on her neck.

Perhaps she was a new recruit, as she looked somewhat tense.

“E-Errr, player Enfield, you’re participating in the <Festa> now for the first time after your last <Gryps> three years ago, but is there any particular reason for it?”

“No, I have just waited until choosing an environment suited in order to display the most ability. I believe it to be the shortest way for me in order to fulfill my wish after all.”

“And what is that wish?”

To her question, the other reporters became slightly noisy.

Regarding the reward for having won a <Festa> — in other words, regarding the fact of having the Integrated Enterprise Foundation grant one’s wish, it was of convention not to inquire into it too much. Unless in the case that the person themselves declared it

beforehand, inquiry into it might incur the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's displeasure in some cases.

But—

“Fufufu..... let's see. It is a good opportunity, so I will talk a little about it.”

When Claudia shook her shoulders happily, she took a slight pause as if putting on airs.

“.....Everyone, do you know Professor Ladislav Bartsheik?”

“If you speak of Professor Bartsheik, I can only think of the one related to the ogre luxes research.....?”

An atmosphere of confusion flowed among the reporters.

However, Ayato noticed that there were several people among them who suddenly became restless.

Perhaps they might have information related to Ladislav to some extent. He could easily imagine that some sort of information control/restriction was applied to the media-related people by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation.

“But, hasn't Professor Bartsheik cut off all contact for a quite long time and should be missing even now.....?”

When the female reporter, who had questioned earlier, asked so to Claudia, the latter easily answered as if she was waiting for it.

“No, the professor is currently held in custody as a person concerned about the judgment regarding the <Dusk of Jade>. My wish is to meet and talk with him.”

Unlike a while ago, clear unrest/agitation ran among the reporters.

Anyone (everybody) knew that all things related to the <Dusk of Jade> were a taboo in Asterisk. Although it was not like they could just forget it, careful attention was necessary when touching that topic.

“E-Errr, what do you mean.....?”

“A secret which only the professor knows — I would like to share it with others.”

Claudia said that, gave a small bow to the reporters, whose faces became stiff, and briskly left the interview space.

“W-Wait, Claudia.....!”

Though Ayato and company, who were left behind, were dumbfounded for a while, they quickly came to their senses and hurriedly ran after her back.

“I don't really know the details, but..... that statement just now, is it all right to make it?”

Julis, who'd caught up with her, asked her as such in a perplexed voice.



The matter related to Ladislav could only antagonize Galaxy. Having said that was none other than Claudia herself.

After she easily declared such a statement like this, it was no wonder that Julis would be perplexed.

“No, rather I judged that this was the very best timing.”

Claudia did not stop and turned only her face with her usual smile.

*

“Fufufu..... Hahahahaha! Haa, amazing. What a surprise..... yes, honestly it was beyond my expectations. The young lady of Enfield isn’t to be taken lightly, eh.”

Madiath let a laughter, which he was unable to bear, resound in the office and gave a round of applause to his praise that contained no trace of lies.

Team Enfield’s winner interview was projected in the space window floating before his eyes until a little while ago, but it switched to CM now.

“It was the right decision to cancel the broadcast delay system, I guess.”

Before, the <Festa>’s image transmissions, although it could be said to be “live” broadcast, were broadcasted while including time for censorship. However, the fans’ opposition regarding this was deep-rooted from the beginning of the <Festa>, and Madiath immediately abolished this system after he assumed his position as Management Committee Chairman.

“.....What is the meaning of this?”

An indifferent voice was raised from a corner of the room.

Having appeared as if melting from the shadow of the wall was a young woman — Varda hanging a mechanical necklace.

“Why does that woman request to enter in contact with Ladislav?”

“Hou, are you worried about your father?”

“.....Certainly, Ladislav was the one who created me, but it is not that kind of relationship.”

“I’m only joking. However, the reason why that young lady requests to enter in contact with the professor, even I don’t..... hmm?”

There, Madiath received a call on his portable terminal.

When he opened the space window, what was projected there was a redhead young man whose face was dyed in irritation.

『What is the meaning of this, Madiath!?』

Though Madiath smiled wryly to these lines, which were exactly the same as Varda's, the young man fully conveyed what he wanted to say.

"Like I said, I'm troubled even if you asked me that. Or if you want, how about you try asking her directly? I'm also interested in it."

『Don't bullshit me! Hurry up and spit out what you know!』

"I don't know with what kind of intention she spoke of such a thing. What I just know is that she has been investigating about the professor since some time now and that it looks like she is about to antagonize Galaxy because of that."

When he honestly stated so, Dirk glared at Madiath with a face as though saying that he did not trust him completely.

『.....Tch, well whatever. But anyway, what that woman did is completely crazy. To think that she would stir up trouble with an Integrated Enterprise Foundation — and the one backing her academy at that of all things. I can only think that she has a death wish.』

"Even I don't deny that at this rate, it'll turn out like that as a result. But I think that the course will probably become slightly more complicated."

『Hah?』

"It won't be able to be dealt with by ordinary means, is what I mean."

As Madiath leaned his body on the sofa's back, he intertwined the fingers of both his hands while curling his lips.

"This is a great opportunity to make Galaxy fall. Now that it's been a long time since the six Integrated Enterprise Foundations has reached a power balance, do you think that the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations will let this chance slip by under their very noses?"

『But, the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations shouldn't be aware of Varda's existence itself. Ladislav was only the ideological leader of the <Dusk of Jade>, nothing more nothing less. Well, even if only this fact is exposed, it will be enough to cause considerable damage, but.....』

When Dirk temporarily cut his words there, he folded his arms and pondered.

『To begin with, hasn't Galaxy already come to an agreement with the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations regarding Ladislav's treatment? They can't afford to break it, right?』

"That's the point. The matter this time is only Galaxy's internal problem after all. Naturally, Galaxy will exert itself in extinguishing the fire, but if it's only interfering by

objecting to Galaxy's means, it won't really be regarded as breaking the agreement, right? Even from a humanitarian viewpoint, the fault in that case will lie with Galaxy after all."

Though it has been a long time since the thing called a sense of ethics became weak, it remained deeply rooted as a public stance even now. Although this in itself hardly held any power, it was not like it had no utility value at all.

Then, Dirk irritably snorted.

『Hmph! Certainly, if they (Galaxy) were pressured by the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations, it'll be quite difficult for them to openly crush that woman, huh.....』

"Moreover this time, it'll be five versus one. Galaxy won't be able to act rashly. And it'll be easy since the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations will just have to give them a warning."

『However, will it really be to the point of them falling?』

"They will fall. I'll make them, that is."

『.....Will you side with that sly fox^[18]?』

Though Dirk threatened with a voice filled with anger, Madiath calmly ward off.

"As the Management Committee Chairman, isn't it natural to protect the participants?"

『.....Tch! You too are in a sense an executive of Galaxy, right? I don't care if things go awry!』

"Of course, I'll skillfully deal with that. Besides, if Galaxy gets serious — in other words, if they are prepared for some loss, even I won't be able to stop them."

It was almost at the same time when Madiath answered so with a soft smile that Dirk, whose irritation went to the extreme, cut the transmission.

"Good grief....."

Then, Varda, who heard the exchange between Dirk and Madiath without butting in until now, muttered with a flat voice.

"As usual, I do not understand humans. Why are they deliberately trying to make things complicated for themselves? I cannot understand that."

She probably did not expect an answer to that, but Madiath shrugged his shoulders and slightly laughed.

"If only restricted to me, I'd answer — it's because it's interesting that way."

¹⁸ referring here to Claudia

*

The special conference room of the Galaxy total headquarters had not even one gaudy ornament.

There were just a long desk and chairs, and someone entering into this room for the first time would probably feel an uncanny insipidness.

—As he did in the past.

Although, Nicholas Enfield, who was waiting sitting upright close to the wall, fully understood its meaning at present.

For Galaxy, anything other than useful existences was unnecessary in this room.

Be it people or things.

“Then, let’s begin.”

When a calm and cold voice told so, the 18 top executives — though more than half of them used communication video — simultaneously turned their gazes to the voice’s owner.

The voice’s owner was Isabella Enfield. She was Nicholas’ wife and direct superior, and one of the top executives sitting there. Wearing her soft blond hair up, her figure, which wore a well-tailored black suit on her body, preserved her beauty which did not let one feel her age at all. Her face revealed a calm smile which Nicholas has never seen crumble for more than ten years.

But, only her eyes retained a machine-like coldness like the other top executives.

“The subject of this time concerns the treatment of Seidoukan Academy’s Student Council President Claudia Enfield. I ask for your unreserved opinions.”

Isabella indifferently said emotionlessly.

Even though it was related to her daughter, not even a fragment of emotions was felt there.

And at the same time, there was no one existing in this place that bantered about that fact.

That was natural; after all, all of them knew that people, who selfishly interjected just because of one’s relatives, could not sit on a seat of a top executive.

“A claim, that requested for a fair judgment by holding up the just cause that is the <Festa>, has already arrived from EP, Solneige and Frauenlob. And the groundwork to the various quarters from W&W and World Dragon is advancing.”

“How troublesome”

“A processing/treatment will be difficult publicly.”

“But, we cannot leave her as is.”

“That said, it is not yet guaranteed that her team will win the championship, right? How about we watch the situation for a while?”

“Still, we should make preparations.”

“Since it is the Festa, we should just use Madiath Mesa. If we make him disqualify them by giving an appropriate reason.....”

“No, that man is not trustworthy.”

“Besides, since the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations holds some implication, it will be difficult to work it out.”

Voices were raised one after the other by the executives, but they never overlapped. After someone’s statement ended, the next voice was spun almost without pause. Moreover, since all of them were voices just as if they were trimmed of all personality, it was to the extent that one did not even know who made which statement.

In fact, there was not even the need to distinguish it in this place.

This was because they did not state their own opinions, but were doing as such in order to make every information and possibility converge.

It might be said to be the, so to speak, self-questions and answers of the huge existence that is Galaxy.

“How about we deal with Bartsheik even here right now?”

“That will go against the agreement made with <Varda Vaos>.”

“Is there any need to abide to it faithfully?”

“We will get absolutely nothing out of it were its existence to leak out to the others (IEF). It will be bad to stimulate it the wrong way.”

“In the first place, where is it and what is it doing currently?”

“According to the report of those Yabuki lots, it seemed to have been confirmed in Rikka in the beginning of spring, but.....”

“As expected, rather than trying to do something about Bartsheik’s surroundings, it will be faster to deal with Claudia Enfield.”

“Then, we should just use those Yabuki lots.”

“No, we should use them as the last resort. More importantly.....”

“First, our position as Galaxy.....”

It was then quiet again for a while, nevertheless the wheel of a conversation in which an uncanny heat lurked in the depths went on.....

“—Then, let’s proceed as such.”

As Isabella said so before long, the meeting ended with that as the signal.

*

—<Gryps> fourth day, Canopus Dome.

Zhao HuFeng stood stock still on the stage as he was at a loss for words.

The absurd orders of his master, Fan XingLu, were as usual.

He could still understand the order of the first round where she prohibited all battle acts to their leader Woo Xiao Fay and ask the remaining four members to win without him. This was because HuFeng was able to convince himself that the order was probably given with the intention of not revealing Xiao Fay's cards. In fact, there was the ability difference that they could handle that much without any problem considering the level of the team that they were to confront in the first round.

But as expected, he couldn't help but find it very difficult to understand the contents of the order given by XingLu for this second round.

Quite contrary to the first round, Xiao Fay was to overwhelm the opponent team all by himself. Even so, if the opponent team was a weak team like in the first round, HuFeng would still understand. Xiao Fay had the ability to be able to accomplish that much. However, the opponent of the second round was not a team which should by no means be taken lightly.

The leader was Seidoukan Academy's rank #4, the <Magician of Ice Frost (Hrímþurs^[19])>. All the other members were also in the list. Even if they could not aim for the championship, it was an average team which had enough ability to be a qualifier for the main battle participation.

Basically, major contenders did not clash against each other in the preliminaries of the <Festa>, but it was a different story when it came to average (middle) teams like this one. This was because it would look bad for the Management to do match making where all the qualifiers' results would be predictable even without the need to watching the matches.

Inevitably, one or two middle teams were allotted to a block where there was a prominent team. And it was often such teams which caused surprises in the <Gryps>.

—However.

『H-How astounding.....! Who would have thought that this second round third match, which was considered to be the best attention grabber, would unfold so one-sidedly.....?!』

The reporter's voice which could be heard through the speaker was slightly trembling. On the other side of the thick membrane of the protective gel, one could see that the audience seating fell silent.

¹⁹ Plural: Hrímþursar; read its meaning here:<http://www.nordicnames.de/wiki/Hr%C3%ADm%C3%BEursar>

It was no wonder.

After all, it was also the same for HuFeng and company from the same team.

“Haa..... Haa.....!”

At the center of the stage, two young men — the Magician of Ice Frost and Xiao Fay faced each other. And around them were four Seidoukan students lying down.

The Magician of Ice Frost's handsome face was painfully/bitterly distorted; although he bent his knees and breathed heavily, he set up a blade of ice which he made with his ability.

On the other side, Xiao Fay was calmly looking down at him with a spear type lux in his right hand as is.

“Fufufu..... It's as if I'm seeing a bad dream, < Hagun Star>.”

“.....”

The Magician of Ice Frost glared at Xiao Fay with eyes filled with coldness and fury.

The surroundings' mana rustled, and cold air, which chilled even in this place dozens of meters away, could be felt rising.

“But — At least a single sword stroke!”

The ground instantly froze ten meters all around with the Magician of Ice Frost as its center.

No, it was not only the ground. Like that, the blocks of ice which covered the ground swallowed Xiao Fay's legs until the calves, thus sealing his movements.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

At the same time, six sharply pointed icicles were formed around the Magician of Ice Frost and fired along with his shout.

A long-range attack from many directions after having sealed the opponent's movements. It was not a bad move.

“.....”

But when Xiao Fay casually struck his feet with the spear butt end, all the lumps of ice covering the ground were immediately shattered to pieces and scattered.

And while the fragments of ice danced down like diamond dust, he swung his left hand towards the icicles approaching, with the momentum of an arrow. Before one noticed, one piece of talisman was grasped in it (hand).

The art formula put into the talisman was released and created a wall of flames. The icicles which crashed into it evaporated and disappeared after exploding; then became steam and wrapped up the surrounding.

“Chance!”

The Magician of Ice Frost shortened the distance under cover of the white smoke and unleashed a slash.

Fast. Furthermore, the ground froze again and then stuck Xiao Fay’s feet onto the ground once again.

Even if cutting only the offense of defense off this instant, one could understand that he balanced his ability as <Dante> and the combat techniques at an extremely high level.

—But, Xiao Fay blocked even that desperate blow with his spear without batting an eyelid.

The Magician of Ice Frost’s movement was clearly faster. In the first place at this distance, the sword that the Magician of Ice Frost used should be much more advantageous than a long-handled weapon like the spear that Xiao Fay used. Despite this, as one wondered whether Xiao Fay’s right hand relaxedly moved, the spear held in that hand blocked the ice blade.

“Guh.....!”

Although the Magician of Ice Frost put strength into both his hands and somehow tried to push back his opponent, he did not move an inch. On the contrary, when Xiao Fay shook off the spear that he set up with one hand, the sword of ice was sent flying from the Magician of Ice Frost’s hands, shattered to pieces in the air and scattered.

“Wha.....!?”

An overwhelming difference in physical ability.

Even so, the Magician of Ice Frost, without being discouraged, reconstituted a sword of ice bigger than the one earlier and drove in slashes one after another.

He sliced it down diagonally from the shoulder, mowed it down with a loud scream and released a stab with all his might.

But as expected, it did not hit/reach his opponent. It did not even graze him.

“.....”

No emotions at all could be read from the expression of Xiao Fay who dealt with these attacks silently.

Having given in first was as expected the sword of ice.

Cracks ran on the bluish sword blade with each stroke, fragments flew around as the blade was chipped..... and before long, it (the ice of sword) made a transparent sound and shattered.

“___”

The color of despair spread on the Magician of Ice Frost’s face.

At that instant, Xiao Fay took only one step forward — with just that alone, the ice which stuck his feet onto the ground shattered and disappeared — and, with casual movements, put his left palm on the Magician of Ice Frost's abdomen.

A slow palm stroke as if caressing.

Immediately after, one understood that a tremendous shock went through the Magician of Ice Frost's body. A crater resulted from the step that Xiao Fay made and the shock ran throughout the stage.

The Magician of Ice Frost lost his conscience completely by that blow.

He crumbled down like a doll whose threads were cut.

“End of the Battle! Winner, Team Yellow Dragon!”

While the mechanical voice resounded, HuFeng recalled his master's words the other day.

『—This fellow won't have any problem. It'll be all right either way.』

They (words) meant exactly as they were stated.

XingLu always attached extreme importance to individual strength. For that reason, it was rare for the disciples of <Divine Revelations> to be taught team play. This was because, though they could learn it independently, XingLu did not stop to studying it diligently and might also accept training them if asked, for her, coordination with others was only something naturally acquired when expanding/enhancing individual ability.

“Phew, as expected of Great Brother^[20]. Even I've been struck dumb.”

Cecily standing next to him (HuFeng) muttered as she was amazed while floating a sweet expression.

“I believed I believed I had understood Great Brother's strength fully enough, but.....”

“Today's was just like Master's strength.....”

Something similar to awe could also be felt in the voices of the twins who were behind him.

As a matter of fact, this was not the first time that Team Yellow Dragon's members saw Xiao Fay fighting. They also had a bout with him during training.

However, they finally realized that it was only a fragment of Xiao Fay's — <Hagun Star>'s power.

“.....Let's go back.”

To Xiao Fay who came over to them, the bodies of HuFeng and company naturally bent on their knees and they took the stance of Bao Qan^[21].

²⁰ 大师兄◊ Great Brother/Big Brother as in senior disciple

²¹ a form of greeting generally used by martial artists (especially in China)

“That was splendid, Great Brother.”

*

—<Gryps> sixth day, Sirius Dome.

Actually, something like an absolute strong person was not that welcomed in the <Festa>.

Immediately after a match is over, the audience's interest dampened, so it was the management's true intention to want to avoid a development which dampened enthusiasm as much as possible. The TV program made great efforts to fill the gap, and the gambling's bookmakers did not establish gambling in the first place.

The exception was the case of having something, other than strength, which attracted people.

Helga Lindvall's overwhelming martial arts accompanied with her beauty.

Or Orphelia Landlufen's sinisterness to carve awe in the beholder's heart whether they wanted it or not.

And — Team Lancelot's, which has won the <Gryps> two times successively, was supreme dignity. At least, Laetitia Blanchard thought so.

The Silver Wings Knights Squadron did not underestimate their opponents no matter who they were, nor were they frightened by illusions no matter what there were and they always opened up the path to victory and glory with all their strength's swords.

The symbol of that was Ernest Fairclough running on the stage right now.

“Haa!”

As Ernest mowed down <Lei-Glems> straight, the sword blade let a pale afterglow shine in its trace/path.

The young man, who was his opponent, reflexively tried to block it with his own sword type lux, and immediately twisted his body as he was startled — but it was too late.

<Lei-Glems>'s blade, as if any physical obstacle did not exist, passed through the young man's body.

But, it cut off only the school badge on his chest.

『U-Uh-oh, only several seconds after the match start, player Ernest Fairclough's <Holy Sword> destroyed the first school badge! However, the player opponent should naturally know about this ability, too, right Seichi-san?』

『Well, even if you know about it, your body will react on its own the more training you've accumulated. Moreover, its wielder is Asterisk's strongest swordsman. There are only a handful of players who can deal with this in their first bout with it.』

『Oh dear, so that is to say what is truly frightening is the Ogre Lux <Lei-Glems>, which can cut only the selected target, and the <Holy Knight> who is its wielder, huh!』

While hearing the live report and commentary across the speaker, and the cheers welling up, Laetitia kneaded prana in an instant.

Mana gathered behind Laetitia and two pairs of shining/light wings appeared left and right from her back. Their size would easily exceed 20 meters.

Ailes d'Ange [22].

It was the ability of Laetitia, also known as the <Witch of Light Wings>.

As the diamond-shaped wings with acute angles bent back and forth in the air, they ran into the stage as if protecting Ernest. Immediately after, the rain of light bullets shot by the opponent team's rear guard attacked Ernest, but not even one of them was able to injure him as they were all blocked by the wings of light.

The <King Spear (Rhongomiant)> Lionel Karsh, who sneaked around from the left side at that opening, charged as to break the opponent's formation. When he swung a very long partisan^[23] type lux, which was twice his height, the opponent team's two rear guards were mowed down in one go with only that.

Although, bringing them down was not the purpose as it was mainly to bring the opponent team into confusion.

“Uwah.....!?”

At the instant when the shooting ceased, Ernest jumped out again and cut down the two vanguards' school badges with a stroke of his sword. His movement was indeed suitable to be described as lightning speed.

And.

“—To thou, O' ring of light of mercy and atonement.”

The rear guard Perceval, who was protected by Kevin Holst also known as <Black Shield (Gareth)>, solemnly said while raising one hand to the sky.

Over there, an ogre lux with shape just like setting a huge cup down on its side was floating. One sharp splinter/thorn rose on the bottom of the wide cup and a golden light was gathered on its tip. The light increased its brightness before one's eyes, filled the cup, became a golden torrent and poured out with an intense force.

“Hiii—!”

²² angel wings in French

²³ a strong supporter of a party, cause, or person, think supporting type lux I guess.

The golden brightness swallowed the two rear guards, that Lionel mowed down a little while ago, instantly just like the lightning of God.

When the light calmed down before long, there were the figures of two people lying face down there. Though there was no wound at all on their bodies.

The <Drill Horn of Atonement (Goat Amalthea)>, which Perceval had, was, along with <Lei-Glems>, an ogre lux for scholarship, and its ability is 『Remove Soul』. The light that the <Drill Horn of Atonement (Goat Amalthea)> emitted dispelled/blew up only the opponent's consciousness without causing any physical destructive power

“End of the Battle! Winner, Team Lancelot!”

Due to the opponent team's leader having lost consciousness, the mechanical voice declared the end.

Three minutes has probably not passed after the beginning of the match.

『E-End of the match! No, but strong! What strength, Team Lancelot! As expected of the defending champion!』

No matter the opponent, Team Lancelot always faced them with respect by going all out. They did not need to hide their cards. Investigate as much as you want and then work out countermeasures. There's no problem whatsoever. After all, they would just simply go ahead of it.

That was the figure of the team which was the king of the <Gryps>.

Chapter 05: Underground Site

—<Gryps> Seventh Day, Sirius Dome.

Ayato and company safely broke through the third round and splendidly succeeded in advancing to the main battle.

“Phew..... Well, it’s going well so far.”

Julis, who returned to the waiting room, sat down on the sofa and contentedly said while showing a tired smile.

“Yes, our team’s condition is also good; I would like for it to continue like this.”

Claudia also had a somewhat relieved expression.

As of now, Galaxy showed no signs of doing anything; to the point that Claudia even thought that it might have been just her needless anxiety.

(Or..... was the interview after the first match not that effective.....?)

At any rate, she should be glad that it was tranquil and peaceful.

“But..... as expected, the other major contenders have all won through without exception.”

Kirin anxiously frowned as she looked at the preliminaries’ tournament table projected in the space window.

Because there were still preliminary matches remaining, the teams qualified for the main battle were not all decided yet; but favorites like the Silver Wings Knights Squadron and Team Yellow Dragon have already safely qualified for the main battle.

“No matter who we’ll confront, proper measures will be necessary, eh.....”

With Team Lancelot as an exception, the prominent teams have won through their matches while hardly revealing their true ability, but even so it was possible to come up with some measures by matching individual data.

“Well, since we don’t know the team we’ll face, it’ll be better to have a meeting after tomorrow’s drawings end, right? I must attend to the drawing, so everyone, please have a good rest tomorrow.”

Like the <Phoenix>, the eighth day, also regarded as the middle day, was a complete rest day and also the day when the drawings for the main battle were held.

“.....Ayato, Ayato”

Saya pulled Ayato’s sleeve.

“I want you to accompany me for some shopping on our way back today.”

“Shopping? I don’t really mind it, but..... what will you buy? From my experience, I think we’d better not go out too much to the town at this period.”

The congestion was amazing in the commercial area during the period of the <Festa>.

Moreover, it was a harsh environment for Saya who had no sense of direction.

“.....I want to finish my luxes tomorrow. But for that, the necessary parts are insufficient.”

Saya’s work seemed to be finally at the final stage. Lately, Ayato has been worried about her condition as she seemed to be steadily working to catch up even at the expense of her sleep; but it might be said to be a relief if a prospect was in sight.

“I see; in that case, it can’t be helped, I guess.”

“The location of the store is here.”

As Saya displayed a map with her portable terminal, Ayato first confirmed the rough position.

“Err, this is..... ah, it’s near the Redevelopment Area. If it’s this neighborhood, there won’t be many tourists; but instead, the public order doesn’t seem that good, so it’d be better to get it over with before it gets dark.”

“All right. Then, let’s go at once.”

When Saya happily nodded, she pushed Ayato from behind.

“W-Wait, Saya.....?”

Julis and Kirin were looking at both of them with eyes as they seemed to want to say something, but before long they sighed as though to say that it couldn’t be helped.

“Both of you, please be careful on your way.”

While hearing the words of Claudia, who saw them off with her back, Ayato and Saya, who fixed their outfits, left the waiting room.

“Thank you for your patronage.”

While being seen off by the shopkeeper with a grim face, they left the junk shop.

It seemed to be a shop which mainly handled second-hand gun type luxes and their junk parts, especially regarding the latter, even when Ayato saw them, he didn’t even know what they were used for, but Saya gleefully looked at this and that around the shop.

“.....Yup, I did some good shopping. Looks like I’ll somehow manage with these.”

Saya, who valuably held the parts she just bought, had an overjoyed face.

For note, both Ayato and Saya had put on a hat as a simple disguise. Normally aside, currently this is during the period of the <Festa> after all. It was better to be careful.

“As expected, this shop has a good assortment of goods. It was worth having come here especially.”

“From your way of speaking, have you come here before?”

When Ayato casually asked so, Saya nodded.

“Yes, once last year in order to buy my father’s birthday present.”

“.....Don’t tell me that you came here alone?”

Saya’s poor sense of direction was strong.

He didn’t think that she could arrive only by herself even if she had a map and a navigator.

“I had Kirin come with me at that time.”

“Oh, I see..... wait, if so, then you should have asked Kirin-chan today too, right.....?”

“Mmm.....”

Saya puffed up her cheeks to these words.

“You don’t understand a girl’s feelings as usual, Ayato.”

“S-Sorry.....”

“In the first place, even though we haven’t gone out just the two of us since the time we were children.”

Now that she mentioned it, it might have been quite a long time since he went out shopping with Saya like this.

“I see..... but, somehow it doesn’t really feel like that.”

When he thought back upon the time when they were children, he spent almost every day with Saya. Though there was the fact that their houses were next to each other, this was because Saya’s poor sense of direction was prominent from that time and he was asked to do various things by Saya’s parents.

And in return, Ayato, who was forbidden from attending the dojo by his father, had Saya tag along with him for his fencing practice.

When he brought up such a topic, Saya nodded nostalgically.

“Oh, yes. Even though I said that I was more compatible with a gun, Ayato making me swing a sword recklessly was awful.”

“Hahaha..... but, I thought that I failed even if I do say so myself. After all, Saya’s winning rate has increased considerably since then.”

When Ayato taught her the basics of Amagiri Bright Dragon Style fencing so that she would help him for/with his practice, Saya immediately absorbed it and on top of that, came to

adapt it into her own style. She used close range combat as assistance for shooting, thus the density between offense and defense increased considerably.

Saya and Ayato had many bouts in one way or another, but Ayato was the one with the most wins back then. Thinking about it, it was from those days that the exchange of “wish tickets” became intense.

“Even though Saya should just have officially entered our dojo. Even in those days, you had skills of at least the elementary level; and if you had continued even now, you might have gone up to the hidden techniques—”

But then, Ayato noticed a strange presence.

(This is.....)

A gaze from behind them — however, it disappeared as soon as Ayato sensed it.

“? What’s the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

As he indirectly gave a signal with his eyes to Saya, who looked puzzled, while saying so, the intention seemed to have been transmitted with that alone.

As they walked for a while, though faint, they once again felt a presence from behind

“.....Are we being aimed at?”

“There’s no doubt that we’re being tailed.”

“By any chance..... is it those guys that Enfield spoke of?”

Saya seemed to suspect whether Galaxy has set something.

In fact, it was no wonder to think like that as there was the Gustave Malraux incident in Lieseltania.

But—

“Though I’m not sure..... I don’t think so.”

“.....Why?”

“This feeling, I’ve experienced it before as well.”

Several presences not particularly dangerous.

Ayato felt an atmosphere similar to the ones who tailed him and Sylvia during the School Festival.

“So, what do we do?”

“Hmm.....”

Perhaps because this area was close to the Redevelopment Area, the figures of people were remarkably few compared to the center of the commercial area. Although there was pedestrian traffic to some extent, it seemed to be difficult to blend into the crowd of people and shake those presences off.

Last time, Sylvia and Ayato had parted in two different directions, but that was out of the question since there was Saya this time. Rather, getting separated from Saya would be troublesome.

In that case.....

“Then, we should just make it clear.”

“Eh?”

As Saya stopped while Ayato was at a loss, she turned back.

Then she took a deep breath and suddenly shouted out.

“—You guys over there! Come out!”

“H-Hold on, Saya!?”

No matter how you looked at it, it was too forceful.

Passerby stopped, wondering what happened and eyes gathered at them (Ayato and Saya).

“Oh crap! We were found!”

“Retreat! Retreat!”

Then, the group which hid behind a building and was watching the situation raised panicked voices and ran away into the back of the alley.

“.....Ayato, we’re chasing after them!”

“Eh? C-Chase.....? Ah, geez!”

He was certainly concerned about the other party’s identity, but chasing after them here was too risky.

There was a possibility that it was some kind of trap and to begin with, currently it was the period of the <Festa>. So, they could not afford to cause troubles.

Above all, it was just after they had finished a match today; and Ayato had released his seal once to go all out. Although they were able to settle the match itself without taking too much time, he could very much overdo it considering his spare energy.

That said, naturally Ayato too reluctantly ran after them as he could not leave Saya alone.

“Saya.....!”

When he called out to Saya running in front, she turned her head only for a moment and shouted.

“Ayato.....! Those guys are unexpectedly fast!”

If it was only leg strength, Saya seemed to be superior, but she couldn't easily catch up with them probably because they were in an alley. Seeing as they were moving through the complex path without any hesitation at all, they were probably quite familiar with it.

(Which reminds me, something like this had also happened during last year's <Phoenix>.....)

Although, because that time he'd escaped with Priscilla, who had gotten entangled with hoodlums, it was totally the opposite from now, where he was on the chaser side.

Before he was aware, abandoned buildings stood in rows in the neighborhood and there was no longer any presence of people. They seemed to have completely entered the Redevelopment Area.

The fact, that, whenever they caught a glimpse of the back figures of the ones that they were chasing, they immediately disappeared again, repeated several times; and then they eventually came out of the alley and appeared on a relatively big path.

“.....Hmm”

Saya, who moved in front, lowered her speed and Ayato caught up with her.

On a closer look, collapsed buildings blocked the path, resulting in a dead end.

Before it, a group of five people appearing to be girls stood there facing Ayato and Saya.

They (Ayato and Saya) didn't know who they were as their faces were concealed with sunglasses, but their uniforms and school badges — if they were not camouflaged, that is — were without doubt Queen Veil's.

(Which means that their identities are.....)

And then.

“Fufufu”

At the center of the five-girls group, the girl appearing to be the leader fearlessly smiled—

“.....We got lost.”

At these words, the remaining four girls sank down to the ground all at once.

“Aaah..... Thought so.....”

“.....looks like it.”

“Even though I thought it'd be all right with Miluše at the vanguard.....”

“Geez, give us a break, leader.....!”

Ayato did not really understand, but as expected he could not feel blood lust from them.

At least, there did not seem to be a strong hostility.

“Errr, so who are you guys.....?”

As Ayato asked so while being perplexed, after having looked at each other, the girls formed a circle and began some kind of discussion.

“What do we do.....?”

“Now that it’s come to this.....”

“We’ll be scolded by the board chairman again.....”

“So, we might as well.....”

“Now frankly.....”

Ayato and Saya waited five minutes while hearing bits of their conservation that leaked out.

“Ah, ahem!”

Probably because they settled their talk, the girl seeming to be the leader took off her sunglasses after clearing her throat unnaturally, and the other four girls followed it slightly later.

“.....As I thought, it’s Team Rusalka, huh.”

Ayato sighed at the expected result.

Perhaps Saya also expected it, she snorted with a glum face.

“H-Huh, you aren’t that surprised.....?”

The ponytail-haired girl who revealed her face — Miluše blinked her eyes as she was surprised.

When speaking of a five-girl group from Queen Veil right in the midst of team battles, what would be associated to that first was Rusalka. Besides, if the five girls’ statures were also almost similar to the data he knew, there was no meaning to it even if they disguised themselves to some extent. It was too obvious.

“.....Which means, is it scouting after all?”

Saying so, Saya glared at them with reproachful eyes.

Although it wasn’t like scouting was prohibited in particular, but she hasn’t heard that much about participants doing it themselves. It was basically the academy’s side which gathered information, because it would be troublesome if it came to a quarrel was something to happen.

However, Miluše shook her head with a puzzled face.

“Eh? Scouting? No, it isn’t that though.....”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

A strange atmosphere flowered between both parties.

“Aah! Leader, you idiot! Even though the other party misunderstood us, you should have just agreed with it!”

“Ah.....”

Though the girl with the smallest stature — Monica rebuked her, Miluše, who revealed a face assuming a defiant attitude, said as to shake it off.

“I-It’s fine! We might as well make it clear here right now; like that, even we’ll feel rather refreshed!”

As Miluše took a step forward as is, she thrust a finger at Ayato.

“Amagiri Ayato! Tell us what kind of relation you really have with Sylvia Lyyneheym!”

“Wha!?”

Ayato unintentionally shrank back to the unexpected question.

“Hohou..... I’m also interested.”

For some reason, even Saya turned her scornful eyes towards Ayato.

“N-No, even if you asked me what kind of relation we have..... In the first place, why do you girls care about that?”

“T-That’s, um..... W-We just feel like it!”

It was an extremely willful reason, but then he did not need to answer as well.

“Sorry, but I don’t intend to answer to something private.”

As he flatly refused as such, the girl with sharp eyes — Tuulia stepped forward.

“What did you say? Since you can’t answer, then as expected it means that you’re really deceiving Sylvia, right?!”

“D-Deceive.....?”

“We have evidence, you know? You were on a date with Sylvia in the last school festival, right?”

“Right, right! Monica and the others cleearly saw you with their own eyes you know?! You two were walking while flirting!”

Behind the two tall girls — Päivi and Monica threw jeering at him while waving their arms.

“Ayato.....”

Saya’s eyes were somewhat cold, too.

“Moreover, you’re on a date with this girl today?! You enemy of woman! Know shame!”

“Seducer! Lecher! Sex maniac!”

“Why do you only know such words.....?”

Though he was insulted awfully, the seemingly timid girl who kept silent until now — Mahulena butted in calmly.

“Um..... I’m really sorry.”

That Mahulena quickly bowed her head.

She seemed to be more reasonable.

“Um, you see, if I briefly explain..... Amagiri-san, um, there are a lot of women around you, right? So, we are all worried about whether Sylvia-san is being deceived by you..... I am very sorry that we asked something private, but I think that we will all feel relieved if you explain your relation with Sylvia-san.”

“Even if you ask me to explain”

Ayato scratched the back of his head wondering what he should do.

“I’m only lending my strength to Sylvie; we don’t really have that kind of relation.....”

“What do you mean by lending your strength?”

“That’s..... I can’t tell you that.”

Sylvia looking for her master, Ursula Svento, was a private problem. Ayato could not afford to reveal it just to protect himself.

“We can’t consent with such an explanation!”

Sure enough, Miluše snarled at him, but then Saya stepped forward as if to cover for Ayato.

“.....No, I’m fine with it.”

“Saya?”

“In other words, this means that Ayato has thrust his neck into something troublesome again, huh.”

Saya turned only her neck to look back at Ayato and slightly smiled.

“Hahaha..... well, yes.”

“Yes, then it can’t be helped.”

Then when she looked in front again, she thrust her finger towards the members of Rusalka like Miluše did earlier.

“You girls are misunderstanding Ayato. So, stop with your false accusations.”

“Mmm! Why do you cover for him?! Even though you might’ve been played with, too!”

“Ayato is certainly dense, meddlesome and softhearted and thus he’s quite careless about the consequences of his actions..... but, he isn’t a person who will trick or deceive someone. I know that better than anyone else.”

“Gununuh.....! How cheeky even though you’re small.....!”

“.....a childish appearance is much better than a childish behavior.”

“What?!”

Saya’s and Miluše’s gazes clashed with each other.

At that time, Ayato suddenly felt the surge of a strong prana.

“—!”

“Watch out!”

Rusalka’s members greatly jumped back as they noticed it a moment earlier than Ayato had raised his voice.

Immediately after, a sword slash ran through the wreckage of buildings which blocked the path and it crumbled down with thunderous sound.

“Geez, how annoying.....!”

A thorny voice that would have those, who heard it, being atrophied resounded from within the cloud of dust rising up densely.

“Hey, Medurone! It’s really fine here, right?!”

The one having appeared while stepping across the wreckage of abandoned buildings was, contrary to the violent tone, still a young girl.

She would be about the same age as Ayato and company. She had unkempt long hair, eyes like a glittering sharp razor and a large sword with a sinister shape was grasped in her hand.

(If I’m not mistaken, that’s.....)

Ayato remembered the girl and the large sword.

If so, then she was without doubt the one who released that slash earlier.

“Good grief..... please, do not act so rashly, Roverika. What does it bring you to uselessly use your power in such a place?”

The one who appeared behind her was a girl with well-kept hair, contrary to the first girl, and wearing glasses. This girl was slightly older than the first one and she had wonderful proportions and a calm atmosphere.

“You’re noisy; I just want to go back quickly. In the first place, you’re the one to blame because you want to go to such a place.”

“You are quite rude for speaking of that place like that. That place is the memorable grounds where Riberio-sama once obtained his glory. So, it is natural for me to at least check it out with my own eyes, right?”

“As if there’s a meaning in mere ruins. How worthless.”

The unkempt-haired girl spat out so.

“Hey, you! What are you doing suddenly?! It’s dangerous!”

Tuulia raised a voice of protest towards the girl.

In fact, one wrong move and the members of Rusalka would have been caught in the collapse of the wreckage, so one could understand that she wanted to raise at least one complaint.

“Hah?”

But when the girl frowned at her voice—

“Kahah!?”

In the next moment, she shortened the distance to Tuulia and drove in a fist into her (Tuulia) abdomen.

Moreover, the girl mercilessly kicked Tuulia, who bent her body in a < shape as she couldn’t bear it, flying to the side.

“Gah.....!”

“Trash has no right to complain to me. Do you want to die?”

The girl said in a cold voice oozing out like midwinter’s darkness to Tuulia, who was flung against the wall surface of a building. And then, she casually raised the large sword held in her right hand.

“H-Hold on.....!”

Miluše went in to stop it, but it was late.

The girl swung down her large sword, and just before its tip was about to pierce Tuulia’s chest.

“!”

“You’re really crazy, you know that.....!”

Ayato, who removed his seal, broke in and blocked the wicked blade with <Ser-Versta>.

In addition, when Saya, who deployed a hand gun type lux, turned its muzzle towards her, the girl took distance while clicking her tongue.

“Are all mercenary students that quick-tempered?”

When Ayato set up <Ser-Versta>, the girl — Roverika, who was Team Hellion’s means of offense, twisted her face in displeasure.

Hellion was a mercenary team which participated in the <Gryps> from Le Wolfe Black Institute. She was a member of HRMS, which was a major PMC of Le Wolfe Keiretsu^[24] and has already settled her participation in the main battle as well. Because he checked their matches as they were one of the prominent teams, Ayato naturally remembered at least the members’ faces and names, too.

“That ogre lux..... ah, I see. If I’m not mistaken, you’re—”

“Seidoukan Academy’s Team Enfield’s Amagiri Ayato alias <Murakumo> and Sasamiya Saya. The girls over there are Queen Veil Girl Academy’s Team Rusalka, right?”

The girl with glasses — Medurone indifferently spun these words as she continued Roverika’s words.

Although both of them had the school badge of twin swords, the uniform that they wore was not Le Wolfe’s. Their white and red suits were the ceremonial clothes of HRMS.

“Perhaps you may not know it, but the participants in the <Festa> are prohibited from engaging in private fights in places without protective fields during the <Festa>’s period. Even only your act just now is enough to make you lose your participation rights, you know?”

“Ha! So what? I don’t care about that. Rather, I’ll feel relieved with that!”

Roverika set up her large sword with both hands as she ignored Ayato’s warning.

<Bershe-Vern> — it was the ogre lux said to have been used by the current HRMS representative Riberio Pareto, who had once won the <Lindvolus>, in his active period.

“Even if it’s an order, I didn’t have any intention to go along with the play of such trashes from the beginning.....!”

Flames of hatred and ill will flickered in Roverika’s eyes, and her right leg gradually shortened the distance.

“—Stop, Roverika.”

Having held her back was a new silhouette which appeared from across the abandoned buildings.

²⁴ for the explanation of this term, please consult these pages: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keiretsu> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keiretsu>

He had a quite large build and wore the same clothes as Roverika and Medurone. He was probably even older than Medurone. If Ayato was not mistaken, he was Team Hellion's leader.

There were again two silhouettes waiting behind him.

“Nevilleworth, don't get in my way!”

“I can't do that. If we were to be disqualified here, it'll also cause trouble to Dirk-dono.”

“As if I care about such a pig!”

“.....In other words, you mean that you'll crush Riberio-sama's reputation. Roverika, do you want our master to lose face?”

To the intimidating feeling put into these words, Roverika turned her face away with an irritated look.

“.....Tch!”

“For some reason, you seem to have been irritated since you came to this town. No, is it since you've met Minerville and that girl called Wakamiya Minato.....?”

“Hmph! It doesn't really have anything to do with those trashes! I just——”

As Roverika awkwardly started to say so, Tuulia ran past Ayato's side and raised her guitar-type ogre lux while gripping its neck. A Trident type light blade unfolded from the body part.

“You bastard, how dare you hit me!”

“Kuhahaha! What, seems like you've a little backbone!”

Roverika, who blocked her blow with < Bershe-Vern >, opened her eyes filled with evil intent wide and raised a joy-filled laughter.

“Everyone, get ready to support!”

“.....Roger”

“OK!”

When looking, the other members of Rusalka have already deployed their ogre luxes respectively and got ready for battle.

“H-Hold on, everyone! Haven't you heard Amagiri-san's words from earlier!? If we fight here, we might be disqualified, you know?!”

Only Mahulena desperately called for self-restraint, but the other members seemed to have turned a deaf ear to it.

“Shut up, Mahulena! Our comrade has been hit, so there's no way we'll overlook it!”

Miluše, with eyes burning with anger, set up a guitar-type ogre lux like Tuulia. Unlike Tuulia, her ogre lux unfolded a sword type light blade.

“.....Ayato, those girls are crazy.”

Saya, who came until Ayato’s side while being cautious as she set up her gun, muttered as she was amazed from the bottom of her heart. It looked like it was quite serious since it made even Saya, who was also known for not knowing self-restraint, go as far as to say that.

“I agree, but I guess we can’t leave it as is.....”

If one were to judge it objectively, because there are chances that fellow teams might clash and crush each others in the <Gryps> so the best option was to leave and profiting from their fight. That said, since Ayato has already been involved in this, it would be irresponsible for only them to run away here.

Above all—

“Hey, don’t run away, Amagiri Ayato! You seem to be the toughest one!”

While lightly dealing with Tuulia, Roverika glared at Ayato.

No matter how he thought about it, it doesn’t look like she would obediently let them leave.

“Good grief, every last one of them.....”

Meanwhile, as Nevilleworth sighed without almost changing his expression, the surrounding mana swirled with an intense force.

“! Don’t tell me he’s a <Dante>.....!?”

At least, as far as they watched of his matches in the preliminaries, he should not have used something like an ability. If that is the case, he has hidden it quite well.

“Do your best to evade it well. I don’t want to be disqualified yet, you see?”

As Nevilleworth raised his right hand, a huge mass of rock was formed overhead of him. Its size would easily exceed 30 meters. Blocking the sun which was about to set, its shadow was enough to engulf everybody present at the place.

“Uwaaaaaaah! Wait a minute, wait a minute! Everyone, retreat, retreat!”

Though Miluše shouted so while panicking, Nevilleworth swung down his arm without minding it.

At the same time, the rock, which stood still in the air, came down as if having lost its support.

“Kuhahahahaha! You’re the one who has gone too far the most.....!”

Roverika’s happy laughter was drowned out by an earsplitting roaring sound and shock; Ayato couldn’t help but cover his face with his arms due to the violent raging wind.

*

“.....They’re really insane, those people.”

After waiting for the dust, which was whirled up, to settle, Ayato put <Ser-Versta> in the setup state and returned it to the holder on his waist.

Before his eyes, a large hole, which was probably on the size of one block, was opening its gaping mouth. Nevilleworth’s ability had destroyed the outer ground layer.

Although the Redevelopment Area’s ground became relatively brittle because periodical maintenance was not performed, it was not something which could be destroyed so easily. The power used to destroy it was unfathomable.

And when looking at the other side of the large hole, Team Hellion, including Nevilleworth, stood there as they observed Ayato’s side. There was quite a distance until the opposite side of the hole, and it was not something which even a <Genestella> could jump over.

The ability used was probably in order to have both sides separated like this, and there was no intent to attack. —of course, still it was off-beat enough though.

After a short time, Team Hellion turned their backs and left to the opposite direction. But, only one person, Roverika remained alone and glared at Ayato’s direction, but before long, she caught up to the other members with reluctant steps as she gave up.

“Phew..... that’s a team I don’t want to confront if at all possible.”

He muttered so while wiping the sweat oozing down.

“Hey, everyone! Are you okay.....!?”

As if responding to the call of Tuulia who was behind Ayato, short voices were raised from here and there.

The debris of the collapsed buildings were scattered around due to the shock just now, and the Redevelopment Area’s desolate scene was made more desolate.

“Well then, we shall go back soon, too..... huh? Saya?”

He looked around, but he could not see his childhood friend’s figure nearby.

Judging from Saya’s skills, it should not have been a situation that she could not evade.

Even so, when Ayato was about to sound out the surrounding with the state of “cognition” as he was worried, he received a call to his portable terminal.

『.....Ayato, are you all right?』

“Yes, Saya, huh. Thanks god..... You too, are you all right? No, rather where are you now?”

As he opened the space window, Saya’s face was projected..... but, the image was mixed with noises and awfully dark.

『I don't know, but probably underground..... somewhere around here, I think.』

“Underground.....?”

When he drew near the edge of the hole until the very limit and looked into it, it wasn't so deep. It was about 20 meters or so.

When Ayato fell into the underground together with Kirin before, they arrived until the ballast area, which is Asterisk's lowest part; this time, it seemed to have stopped at relatively superficial levels such as an underground passage or drainage channel.

The rock created by Nevilleworth's ability has already been disintegrated again into mana and nothing was left of it.

However, there were many holes which lead to underground passages buried under the rubble. Moreover, the collapse seemed to continue even now.

“So, you're locked up somewhere, huh..... This is quite troublesome.”

『.....It isn't like I can't blow off debris of this degree with my lux.』

“No, if you carelessly destroy anything, we don't know where it'll collapse, so it's dangerous.”

Even though they didn't even know how deep she was, it would be better not to do anything careless.

『I see..... then, let's think of another way. Oh, also though it isn't very important, I have another thing to report.』

“Hmm? What is it?”

At the same time as Saya subtly frowned, Tuulia's voice resounded from behind Ayato.

“Eeeeeh!? You're locked up!?”

『..... Team Rusalka's leader is next to me.』

“Eh.....?”

When he looked behind him, a space window was also opened in front of Rusalka's members who formed a circle, and the face of Miluše, who seemed like she would burst into tears at any moment, was projected there.

“Then, there's only the two of you there.....?”

『Looks like it.』

As the other Rusalka members noticed it, they simultaneously turned their gazes towards Ayato.

“.....This is getting more and more troublesome.”

As Ayato revealed a wry smile, he scratched the tip of his nose while pondering.

“.....Anyway for now, rescuing both of you is the top priority.”

To Mahulena’s words, everyone nodded including Ayato.

Even thinking situation wise, because now was not the time to quarrel, Rusalka also consented to a temporary truce. Though, Ayato really had nothing against Rusalka from the start.

“Normally thinking, I think that we should contact the star guards and wait for rescue, but.....?”

“Rejected, rejected! If you do that, they will find out that Monica and company fought here!”^[25]

Monica flatly rejected Ayato’s quite proper suggestion

Although she unnaturally puffed out her cheeks, her eyes seemed serious.

“.....Well, it isn’t like we got ordinary people involved in it, so I don’t think that only one private fight will suddenly deprived us of qualification; but there’s no mistaking it that we’ll get severely scolded by the board chairman.”

Mahulena hung down her head with a sigh, but she immediately raised it and said as if having made up her mind.

“But even so, I agree with Amagiri-san’s suggestion. The safety of the two of them come first after all.”

“Eeeh, hold on, hold on, Mahulena!”

Monica pouted in displeasure.

“Jeez, Tuulia, say something.”

“.....No, I also vote in favor of Amagiri’s opinion.”

But, Tuulia exhaled with a reluctant face.

“Eh, why, why?”

“It’s frustrating, but I owe a debt to Amagiri for having saved me earlier. I can’t be ungrateful.”

As she said so while slightly blushing, she abruptly turned her face away after glaring at Ayato once.

“.....Then, I also vote in favor.”

²⁵ for note, Monica also kind of talks like Flora, that is, she called her own name when she addresses herself

“Gununuh.....! You are too coiled up when it come to distant things as usual, Päivi!”

Though Monica stamped her foot on the ground like a child, she crestfallenly dropped her shoulders after a short while as she gave up.

“Yes, yes, got it. It’s fine if you do as you like. Even though Monica was thinking for the sake of everyone in her own way, like this I’ll be the bad guy if I alone am against it.”

Her figure, when kicking a stone while sulking, really looked like a child’s

Though, according to data, Monica should be the oldest of the members of Rusalka.

『Um, that’s good and all, but.....』

『.....It seems kind of impossible to wait for rescue.』

However, Miluše and Saya, who were projected in the space window, told so in meek voices.

“Eh? W-What do you mean by impossible?”

Mahulena couldn’t hide her uneasiness.

『Well, we’ve been hearing a disquieting sound since a little while ago.....』

『.....To put it bluntly, it doesn’t look like the ceiling will hold.』

“Do you mean that it’ll collapse again?”

As Ayato checked, Saya nodded.

『.....Yes. But, the passage continues deeper, so we can go there.』

“Hmm.....”

The aspects of Asterisk’s underground block were different from area to area regarding depth. Though the subway network was very dense in the central section, it hardly went by in the residential area’s outer edge. There was at least a route which was connected to the central district’s terminals.

Conversely, while the underground passages and the drainage channels were entangled complexly like a maze, they were stretched around in the whole underground of Asterisk.

But for security-related reasons, the present condition/situation is that the details about it are not made public. The underground block was under the jurisdiction of the Facilities Maintenance Division, and general communications were essentially cut there. The fact that Saya and Miluše were able to communicate like this was probably because they were near the large opened hole, and if they were to move in the depths, it would be difficult maintaining contact as is.

In other words, Saya and Miluše would wander around the maze-like underground passages without being able to keep contact with Ayato and company as is.

“I’ll ask just in case, but what about Miluše-san’s sense of direction.....?”

“Didn’t you see when we were running a while ago?”

“.....I see.”

This means that the two girls themselves with a poor sense of direction should be added into the present conditions.

『Uwaaaah!』

A panicked voice was heard from the other side of the space window.

When looking, Miluše had just dodged, by a hair’s breadth, falling rubble the size of a fist.

『Looks like it’s seriously bad. We’ll somehow manage on our side, so—』

As Saya said up to there, the space window’s noise became more intense and it completely blackout before long.

Ayato and company, who were left, could only look at each other silently as is with faces filled with anxiety.

*

Although pale lights were lit at regular intervals in the underground passage, it was hard to say that the amount of light was enough as the passage itself was wide.

In the dim and sodden space, only the footsteps of the two girls echoed.

“.....”

“Hey, hold on! If I’m not mistaken..... you’re called Sasamiya, right? Y-You’re walking too fast.....!”

As if hiding on Saya’s back, Miluše, who followed with nervous steps, protested so with a face about to cry.

“There isn’t really any need for me to wait for you.”

Saya flatly answered as such as she looked for an exit which connected to the surface while carefully keeping a watchful eye.

She’d heard that there were communication terminals for emergency use for those, who have lost their way into the underground block, but she could not yet find one of sorts.

“It’s not you, but Miluše!Well, that’s also a stage name though.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can follow me if you want, but I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

“No way.....! I-I can’t stand such a place.....!”

In fact, Miluše, who ran her eyes in all directions cowardly and busily, seemed to be quite frightened.

However, although it was left unsettled due to a sudden intruder, they were glaring at each other until just a little while ago. Though Saya didn’t intend to continue in this situation, it didn’t mean that she intended to get along well with Miluše.

Above all.

“.....I’ll tell you just one thing.”

“W-What?”

As Saya stopped and look back, Miluše retreated half a step as she was daunted by her gaze.

“Ayato’s enemies are my enemies. If you want to do wrong to Ayato, I won’t show you any mercy.”

Then, Miluše retorted sullenly.

“Li-ke-I-said, Amagiri Ayato is.....”

“I got it. If you say up to there, then I shall thoroughly tell you about Ayato’s splendor.”

“Huh?”

As she began to walk again, Saya raised her index finger and began to talk.

“This was when I was around 7 years old. It was when we were training together with Haru-nee at the hill at the back of our homes. Because I’d been careless.....”

“Um..... do I have to listen to it no matter what?”

“If you want, I don’t really mind you going ahead, you know?”

“After you please” when Saya urged her as such, Miluše fixedly stared at the darkness before her eyes, and then swallowed her saliva.

“.....No, please let me listen to it by all means.”

“Very well.”

As Saya coolly nodded, she once again began to talk fluently in order to enlighten Miluše about Ayato’s splendor.

And then, they probably walked for a full hour.

“—and when I saw Ayato’s brave figure rushing there in the nick of time, he was like a knight on a white horse..... Hmm?”

“.....Hmm? Is it over?”

When Saya suddenly interrupted her own story and stopped, Miluše asked in a voice without power with a tired face.

“.....This place is different.”

Saya crouched down and pointed to the ground.

Some brand new footprints still remained alongside the wall.

“Footprints? But, why only here.....?”

“.....Dust.”

When Saya traced the ground with her finger, dust stained her finger.

But, it was only in this area where dust fell.

“Don’t tell me.....”

When Saya stood up, she put her ear on the wall and struck it several times.

“.....Hmm”

When she realized that there was eventually a strange reaction, a heavy sound resounded, a part of the wall slowly slid and a new path appeared there.

“A-A hidden door.....? Why is there such a thing here.....?”

Dust probably fell on this area when this was moved.

In that case, this hidden door must not have been used for quite a long time.

“And..... there was someone who opened it just recently.”

Saya muttered so to herself.

“Hey, hey! There’s something inside!”

When she turned her gaze to Miluše’s somewhat excited words, there was an inconspicuous darkish silver door at only about 5 meters deep ahead of the hidden door.

When Saya and Miluše exchanged gazes with each other, they carefully approached with neither of them nodding.

“This..... isn’t it by any chance an elevator?”

Miluše said while joy showed through her voice.

It certainly looked like a plain elevator at first glance.

If that’s the case, perhaps they might be able to go out to the surface like this.

“But..... it’s suspicious no matter how you think about it.”

“Well..... that’s true, but”

Miluše did a complete change and knitted her eyebrows as she said so in a low voice.

.....It looked like it^[26], and as she immediately pulled herself together, she suddenly pressed a button at the side of the door with her finger.

Then the door opened with a dull sound and a 2 m² cozy space appeared.

“Look, look, it’s an elevator after all!”

“.....I don’t know whether you’re cowardly or bold.”

“I’m afraid of ghosts! And even when thinking, I don’t know what I don’t know; so nothing will start if we don’t act.”

Although it was careless behavior, there was some truth in her saying.

Even if they wandered about the underground passage like this, they didn’t know whether they’ll really find an exit.

“There’s only one button inside as well, huh..... what do we do? Should I try pressing it?”

“.....In for a penny, in for a pound^[27]. You should do as you would like.”

Saya also got into the elevator and prepared herself for the worst.

“All right, then here I press.”

When Miluše pressed the button, the door closed and the elevator began to move with creaking fanning anxiety.

“.....”

“.....”

Then, they immediately realized.

“Is this by any chance going down?”

“.....It’s going down.”

They had no willpower to talk any further than that.

As they both silently stood stock still for quite a long time whether because the elevator’s speed wasn’t that fast, or because it went down until a very deep place, or because it was merely a problem of their bodies’ sense of time, the elevator finally stopped and the door opened.

“Eh.....?”

Immediately after, Saya and Miluše simultaneously became speechless.

²⁶ this is referring to Miluše thinking the darkish silver door looks like an elevator door

²⁷ which means that when gambling or taking a chance, you might as well go the whole way and take all the risks, not just some

This was because what spread out there was a space so wide that one could hardly think this was the underground^[28].

A field like a stage before any repair/upgrade spread before their eyes. The difference it had from a standard stage would be its hexagonal form and also the fact that pillars stood at its corners. The ceiling was surprisingly high and the six pillars inlaid with a pale light source stood towering over the surrounding as if piercing it.

The elevator went along the interior of a pillar, and Saya and Miluše set their feet from there to the field while being dumbfounded.

But, the elevator's door closed as soon as they got off it.

“Ah!”

When they thought “oh crap！”, it was already too late; the door had completely closed showing no signs of opening again.

In the first place, even something like a button could not be found around.

“Uwawawah.....! W-What do we do.....?”

Miluše was clearly flustered, but Saya kept silent and slowly looked around as to survey/explore.

When she looked around once again, the field was quite desolated and the pillars were about to collapse as well. Debris of various sizes were scattered here and there and from the scene and stagnant atmosphere, it could be inferred that this was a place which was abandoned long ago.

“Don’t tell me this place is.....”

When raising one’s gaze, an audience seating-like space was provided at a height that overlooked the field, and that turned Saya’s hunch into conviction.

“.....<Eclipse>”

While thinking back upon a story she heard from Ayato, Saya advanced to the center of the field.

<Eclipse> — it was an illegal armed battle tournament said to have once been held somewhere in Asterisk. A so-called shadow <Festa> where battles without rules that could be called as similar to killing each other unfolded.

And it was said that Ayato’s big sister, Amagiri Haruka fought there — and was defeated.

Saya advanced as if being guided by something and found something which was under the debris where she ran her eyes by chance.

²⁸ when the novel mentions the underground it means underneath Asterisk not to be confuse with underground spaces and such in general

—Glasses with broken lens and a bent frame.

“.....”

After having fixedly stared at it, Saya picked it up, dusted it off and, after wrapping it carefully in a handkerchief, put it inside her pocket.

“H-Hey, don’t leave me alone, I’m scared..... oh, what’s wrong?”

To the question of Miluše who ran after her, Saya slightly shook her head and answered.

“.....It’s nothing. More importantly, we must look for an exit.”

Then, after who knows how much time has passed.

“Ah jeez, I’m tired-.”

It was Miluše who gave up first.

As she sat down on nearby debris, she complained so while stretching out both her hands loosely.

“There’s nothing like an exit anywhere.....!”

It was certainly as Miluše had said, they searched until every nook and corner of this field, but they did not find anything that looked like an exit. This field was shaped like a thumbtack and it was supported by pillars as if floating from the bottom of the cylinder pit. A gap whose bottom could not be seen lay between the audiences seat, and it seemed like it wasn’t possible to jump over it.

“.....It’s no use even if you shout. Let’s wait for help.”

Saya said so, and also sat so as to lean on the debris.

She reached the same conclusion as Miluše. That is, there is nothing that could be done in this situation.

“Haa..... At any rate, why did it turn out like this?”

“It’s originally you guys’ fault because you came to cause trouble for Ayato.”

“Like I said, that was.....!”

“Very well. Let’s continue the story from a little while ago. This time, I’ll tell you about the story of when I got lost in town during summer vacation. It became night and it also began to rain, so I, who could do nothing but only walking around.....”

“Wah, sorry, sorry! I got it already! I understand enough how good a guy Amagiri is, so please!”

“Then, it’s good.”

When Saya said so, Miluše grandly sighed.

“Sigh..... while saying such a thing, I suddenly became hungry..... ah, that’s right!”

As Miluše’s expression suddenly brightened, she rummaged around inside her uniform’s pocket.

“Ta-dah! I was going to take the cookies given to me that I wasn’t able to eat back home today! I’m great!”

What she took out in high spirits were two packages of bought cookies.

“.....I see, I see. That’s great.”

When Saya ignored her as it didn’t matter to her, after Miluše fixedly stared at the cookies for a while.

“Hey, you.”

“Hmm?”

“Take this.”

Saying so, she threw one package of cookies over to Saya.

“.....Why do you give me this?”

While catching it quickly, Saya fixedly stared at Miluše.

Miluše should have no obligation to share this with Saya.

“Well, of course I intended to eat it all alone at first.”

Certainly, if anything Miluše probably had such a character.

“But, I suddenly thought. Such guys often appeared in movies, but isn’t it quite uncool? So, I found it detestable.”

“.....”

It was very simple, that’s why it was a reason which surprised Saya.

“I got it. I’ll gratefully accept it.”

Saying so, Saya bowed her head.

Both of them ate up the cookies in no time, and then time where they did nothing flowed as such. Before long, Miluše, who rested her chin on her hands as she was bored, asked Saya in a casual tone.

“However you, when it comes to Amagiri, you really get worked up, eh. Is he so important to you?”

“Of course”

“Does that mean..... um, that you l-like him.....?”

“.....Well, you may say that.”

Saya nodded.

“In that case, why don’t you properly grab hold of him?”

Although blushing slightly bashfully, Miluše further asked.

“That.....”

Has nothing to do with you.

As she was about to continue as such, Saya changed her mind.

“—Because I don’t want to tie down Ayato.”

Even she didn’t really know the reason, but she said so before she knew it.

“? I don’t really understand.”

Miluše folded both her arms around the back of her head with a wondering face.

“As for me, when there’s something that I want, I will do anything to get it no matter what though.”

“.....Then, what is it that you want?”

“Of course, it’s obviously the seat of the world’s number one!”

As Miluše stood up from the debris, she strongly clenched her fists.

“The world’s number one?”

Saya cocked her head in puzzlement as she didn’t know what Miluše was talking about.

“I finally came so far! Then after I surpass that Sylvia, I’ll be the top then! What you call the summit!”

“Ah..... music, huh.”

After hearing the name of Sylvia, Saya finally understood.

But at the same time, a different question came to mind.

“But..... then why did you attack him verbally for the sake of Sylvia Lyynehey?”

“Uh..... li-like I said, that’s.....”

Miluše openly hesitated to speak and turned her gaze away, but after a while, she said with a serious face.

“.....For us, Sylvia is a person we long for after all. I think it’s probably so for not only us, but also for almost all the students of Queen Veil.”

“.....”



Miluše's voice was calmer than it has been until now; Saya did not interrupt her and urged her to go on with only her gaze.

"Until three years ago, we were completely newcomers without any reputation at all, but Sylvia was already called the world diva at that time..... that's why we'll surpass her one day. I thought that for that purpose, I'll do anything and I think so even now, too. That's true."

Miluše took a breath once there and then turned her gaze above.

"But, if Sylvia is really being deceived by some bad guy, isn't it pitiable for her? It's also true that I thought so."

".....You're contradicting yourself."

Or perhaps should one say that she was too honest with her feelings then and there.

"Well, you're right, but it's fine, isn't it? At that time, we'll do what we want to do with all our power. Of course on top of that, I'll also obtain everything I want. And then, there won't be any problem!"

Miluše declared so as she returned to her usual tone at the end.

"After all, if I were to hold back my feelings, I'd definitely regret it one day."

"....."

Saya opened her eyes wide to these words as she was startled.

Before she realized it herself, she extended her hand on the thing she'd put into her inside pocket.

".....Regret, huh."

"That's right. Come on, it's often said, right? That rather than doing nothing and then regretting, it's better to do it before regretting it."

Miluše refreshingly smiled while showing her teeth.

Saya answered to that with a wry smile.

".....In that case, do your best to the utmost in order to surpass Sylvia Lyyneheym."

"That doesn't go quite that smoothly, you know? Be it music or ranking, it'd be fine only if we could be above her in at least one of these two though....."

Miluše crestfallenly dropped her shoulders.

Saya, who was looking at such a Miluše, lightly sighed and said with an amazed expression.

"In my opinion, you guys are fighting in the same arena as Sylvia Lyyneheym. If you really want to win no matter what, it's not like I don't have any ideas."

"Eh? R-Really? What, what? What should we do?"

Saya pushed aside Miluše, who held onto both her shoulders to the extent of firmly clutching them, and cleared her throat.

“.....Achievements from the <Festa>.”

“Achievements.....?”

“Sylvia Lyyneheyem hasn’t won a <Festa> yet.”

“Well, there was a monster in the <Lindvolus> in which she had taken part in after all.”

Needless to say that she was talking about the <Venomous Witch>.

“Right. As long as Sylvia Lyyneheyem is fixated on the <Lindvolus>, the chance for that is slim. And on that point, there’s a possibility for you guys.”

“! I see, if we win the <Gryps>, then.....!”

Miluše’s face suddenly brightened.

“But..... this time will be impossible for you guys. So do your best for the next one and thereafter.”

“Mmm! How do you know that it’ll be impossible?”

“Because we’ll win the <Gryps> this time.”

When Saya said so directly, Miluše’s expression changed completely from her smile and she raised her eyes.

“Wha! Y-You, too, should do your best for next time! It’ll be we who will win this time!”

“.....That’s not gonna happen.”

When the two girls glared at each other and their gazes began to give off sparks, at that time.

“Good grief..... to think that you girls really came here.”

A voice mixed with a sigh suddenly resounded from behind.

“!”

When they hurriedly turned around, a woman with dignified looks was coming out of the elevator of the pillar there.

“Guard Captain..... Helga Lindvall”

Saya and Miluše were flabbergasted.

Further behind Helga, there were also the faces of Ayato and the Rusalka members.

“Saya!”

“Miluše!”

They all rushed over to the two girls with smiles of relief and delight.

“It’s good that both of you were safe.”

Helga also revealed a faint smile at that scene, but her voice and countenance immediately changed to a severe one.

“However, this place is originally off-limits — no, a place where you can’t access. I will have you tell me in detail how you got in here.”

Chapter 06: <Lyre-Poros>

A somewhat sad evening sky. A nostalgic townscape. The cawing of crows audible far away.

She immediately understood that this was a dream.

It was a memory of a distant past.

“Oh, what’s the matter, Saya-chan?”

Haruka, who hung a shopping bag, gently called out to Saya who sat down holding her knees in the veranda.

“.....I had a quarrel with Ayato.”

“Hohou.”

Haruka threw a fleeting glance to the building behind.

The sound of Ayato training could be heard from the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style’s dojo. In fact, the numbers of times which Ayato and Saya fight could be counted, and each time Ayato secluded himself in the dojo.

“I see; looks like he isn’t in a good mood as well, huh. His center of gravity seems off.”

As she grasped it by just hearing sounds, Haruka put her hand to her waist. Her face was not that a big sister, but an instructor’s.

But she immediately returned to her gentle smile again; she turned to Saya and said.

“So, what’s the cause?”

“.....It’s about the fact that I’m moving. He asked me why I didn’t say anything.”

“Ah, that, huh.”

Haruka nodded as she understood.

Haruka apparently knew the circumstances.

“I didn’t tell him because I thought that it’d better if it was Saya-chan who told him after all, but well looks like he found it out himself, huh.”

“.....Yes.”

“What didn’t you say anything?”

Saya looked daunted at Haruka’s straightforward question, but she honestly answered though somewhat averting her gaze.

“I thought..... if I told Ayato, he’d definitely mind it.”

“Well, yes..... that’s how he is after all.”

“I don’t like that, so I wanted us to spend our time like usual as much as possible.”

It was just for that reason, and yet Saya did not understand why Ayato was so angry.

“I see. Saya-chan is kind as usual, eh. Yes, good child, good child.”

When Haruka said so, she suddenly pulled Saya and tightly embraced her.

“.....Haru-nee, I can’t breathe.”

“Oops, sorry. —But you know, Saya-chan. I understand your feelings, but I think that it was impossible from the start.”

“Why?”

When Saya asked with puzzled face, Haruka gently stroked Saya’s head while telling her.

“After all, even if Ayato were to act as usual, it wouldn’t be the same for Saya-chan, right? By saying nothing about moving and enduring it alone, did you think that you could play with Ayato as usual?”

Saya shook her head.

“Impossible, right? In this world, there are a lot of things that one should endure and also things that one shouldn’t; but at least if the other party were to be someone like Ayato, I think that it’d better to tell him honestly. Of course, I don’t say that it’ll definitely turn out well after that. But, you wouldn’t end up regretting it.”

“.....I don’t really understand.”

When Saya said so with a sullen face, Haruka smiled wryly as she was troubled.

“Hahaha, that’s also true. Then, let’s have you to reconcile for now. Even you, Saya-chan, you don’t want to move while having a quarrel with Ayato as is, right?”

“.....Yes.”

Since that was certainly true, she strongly nodded.

“Yup, it’s good to be honest. Then I’ll give to such Saya-chan a sure-kill item for reconciling with him.”

“.....Thank you, Haru-nee.”

When Saya bowed her head, she took two lollipops, which Haruka took out from within the shopping bag, and hurriedly ran towards the dojo.

*

“—Saya, come on, wake up. The captain has come.”

“Nhn.....?”

When he woke Saya by shaking her shoulders, his childhood friend who was very bad at waking up, sluggishly looked around while rubbing her eyes.

“.....Where is this place?”

“It’s the Star Guards’ headquarters.”

“Star Guards.....?”

Saya did not move an inch as if frozen for a while, but she clapped her hands as she recalled the sequence of events before long.

“Ah, that’s right.”

The Star Hunter Guard’s headquarters were located almost at the central part of the administration area, next to Rikka government office.

The outward appearance was a building without redeeming features, but people, who had confidence in their own abilities, would feel the severe atmosphere drifting around it.

After all, the guard members had to deal with Asterisk’s students. One would not be fit for unless he or she possessed a suitable skill. In fact among the Star Hunter Guards, there were a lot of members originally students; and stalwarts, who had their names entered as <Page One>.

In one room of these Star Guards’ headquarters — it was a plain room with only business-like chairs and desk — Ayato and Saya were waiting for Helga Lindvall.

“Did you finally wake up? First of all, sorry for having made you wait for a long time. I was unexpectedly delayed while listening about team Rusalka.”

Helga, who carried things appearing to be documents, said so and sat in front of Ayato and Saya.

“Ah, no.....”

Outside of the window was the night darkness. On the other side of lined up buildings, the dazzling street lights of the commercial area illuminated the night sky, which made it contrastive to the area around here which has already fallen silent.

“About your personal fight in the Redevelopment Area, it was settled by you two only having being rolled up in it. There’d be no problem in particular regarding that.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Though they thought that it would probably be fine, they felt relieved when being told as such formally. For the time being, it did not seem like they would cause trouble for the other team members.

“.....And what about them?”

“Regarding Team Rusalka and Team Hellion, a sanction of some sort will probably be handed down; but well it won’t be that severe for them as well.”

While answering Saya's question as such, Helga's tone seemed somewhat dissatisfied.

All Sanctions related to the <Festa> was the sphere of action of the Steering Committee. The Star Hunter Guards only supervised them and naturally they had no discretion of being able to interfere with the sanctions. Helga probably had a say on that point.

As she guessed such thought of Ayato, Helga loosened her mouth.

"Of course as for me, I think that it's necessary for a matter like this one — especially, for a dangerous team like Hellion to face a severe punishment. But, I myself cannot afford to deviate from this city's rules. In the first place, the system itself of mercenary students is....."

Speaking up to there, she slowly shook her head.

"No, this was a digression. Let's return to the main issue. You've probably noticed already, but that place, where you lost your way, was the stage of the <Eclipse>."

".....It's as I thought, huh."

Although he vaguely thought so when he went down to that place to rescue Saya. Ayato no longer doubted it after being told by the person who destroyed <Eclipse>.

After all, when he contacted the Star Hunter Guards, Helga showed up herself along with a few members, and one person among used a search ability to grasp Saya and Miluše's position in an instant. As soon as they found the two girls, they were immediately taken to the surface and were moved, almost forcibly, to the Star Hunter Guards' headquarters. It was not a situation where they could ponder calmly.

"First, about that place, it is located at the ballast area's bottom, the lowest level in this Asterisk — in other words, underwater."

"The ballast area's.....?"

Saya, who lost her way there, opened her eyes wide as she also seemed surprised.

But thinking about it, there was probably no better suitable hiding place than that. Ayato himself had also set foot in the ballast area (though it was not as if he wished it), but the area was almost impossible to find.

"There are three kinds of entries. The entry for the audience, the entry for the organizer and the entry for participants connected directly to the battle field. The six routes for the participants are all in the underground block and all of them are camouflaged. As you girls saw it."

".....But there was someone who opened that hidden door before us. Otherwise, I shouldn't have noticed, too."

"About that....."

As Helga exhaled as she was troubled, she slightly broke her sculpture-like dignified seated posture.

“Well, it’s probably no use hiding it now. Those who did it were the Le Wolfe’s mercenary students..... those one of Team Hellion.”

“Those guys did?”

Saya frowned in displeasure.

“After I questioned them regarding the matter of the private fight, they recognized it without pretension. They said that they went to see that place and went back.”

“.....They went to see it? Why?”

“Their boss, the HRMS representative, Riberio Pareto, was someone who once won the <Lindvolus>; but at the same time — he was a selected participant of the <Eclipse>. This proof was obtained from a testimony from a spectator at that time. The spectator also recognized that he was a student, he proved to be a problem for me, too.”

Perhaps because she remembered those days, Helga’s tone was somewhat bitter.

“It isn’t his style to use tricks or trickery, but he’s strangely charismatic and it felt like those guys of Hellion were completely devoted to him, too. Perhaps for those guys it might be something like a pilgrimage.”

“But..... how did those guys get out of there?”

According to Saya’s story, the door automatically closed when they got off the elevator and it did not seem to come back afterwards.

“The elevator for participants is a one-way ticket principle. One can’t go back unless he wins the match..... But, selected participants like Riberio seemed to be able to freely use a special ID card. I guess that they’ve probably used it.”

“Can I ask one question as well?”

Ayato tried asking about a doubt he held all along since listening to Helga.

“The <Eclipse> is no longer, right? In that case, why is such a place still remaining and why is the elevator still operational?”

Then, frustration blurred on Helga’s face.

Not to say that Helga was expressionless, but she rarely broke out of her calm demeanor. Helga continued her words unusually emotionally.

“I think that I told you before, but it’s the present situation that the investigation related to Danilo could not be advanced due to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s pressure. The <Eclipse> is a prime example; an order under the guise of a request of absolutely not laying a hand on that hall came. We can’t take out even an evidence from there even now.”

The moment when she heard it, one could see that the body of Saya, who was sitting next to Ayato, slightly stiffened.

“—What is it?”

As Helga noticed it, she turned sharp eyes to Saya.

“.....It’s nothing.”

But as Saya said so while feigning ignorance, she averted her eyes to gloss it over.

Though Helga stared at the face of such Saya for a while with eyes as if seeing through her, she took a small breath before long and returned to the talk.

“.....Hmm, well whatever. By the way, a protective field for trespass prevention was installed into the elevator connected to that hall, but it seems to have been broken by Team Hellion, too.”

“Certainly, there was no such thing when we entered.”

Team Hellion’s ability was certified. Even a protective wall of Ardi class would probably not have stopped them.

“Now then, that’s all I can say. Any other questions?”

“No, it’s all right.”

“.....Me, too.”

As Ayato and Saya answered so, Helga lightly nodded and stood up.

“I’m sorry to have taken your time while you’re in the middle of a <Festa>, but this is also my job. Please, don’t think badly of it.”

Being urged by Helga, who said so, they left the room.

“Ah, that’s right. I can have someone send you to your academy if you want, but.....”

“It’s not necessary.”

Before Ayato answered, Saya flatly said.

And then, as she bowed to Helga, she took Ayato’s hand and began to walk.

“H-Hold on, Saya.....?”

“It’s fine, so just come.”

He advanced through the dull passage while being pulled by Saya, who walked rapidly as is. On the way, when he turned to look back, Helga was seeing them off with a wry smile.

“Phew..... We’re pretty far now, it should be fine.”

After coming out of the Star Hunter Guards’ headquarters and walking through the street at night for a while, Saya who advance in front said so and stopped.

Although called administration area, there were few building still lighted with light; but there were almost no one who went out at this time.

Nevertheless, after carefully examining the state of the surrounding, Saya turned to Ayato.

“Ayato, look at this.”

When she took out the thing, which she wrapped up in a handkerchief, from her inside pocket, he handed it over to Ayato.

“This is?”

Light [29]. But the moment he touched it, Ayato felt a shock as if an electric current ran throughout his body.

He slowly opened the handkerchief.

And, he unintentionally held his breath.

“I found it at that place.”

Saya’s words could be heard somehow distantly.

It, whose lens were broken, frame bent and had lost its practicality, was yet without doubt the glasses that Ayato’s big sister — Amagiri Haruka wore.

“I thought that it’d be bad if it was found by the captain. Because she said that we mustn’t take out anything.”

“Ah, so that’s why.....”

But from the look of it, Helga might have possibly noticed something.

Even so.

“.....Thank you, Saya.”

“Yes, it’s not a big deal.”

To the words of thanks of Ayato, Saya said so bashfully.

*

—<Gryps> fourth round.

“HAA!”

The stance [30] of the young man with pigtail caused a small crater on the stage and his lunged palm stroke attacked Ayato.

²⁹ as in not heavy, but as in resolve

³⁰ the term used here is 震脚, which I don’t use how to translate in English. In general, it’s a term of Chinese martial arts and is a movement of strongly stamping the ground with a foot. It frequently used in Japanese martial arts using a specialized weapon such as Kendo and Jukendo

Although he barely dodged that attack, moreover, a braid-haired girl with a small stature lunged her elbow while stepping in as she bent down from the right. Ayato tried to check it as he mowed down <Ser-Versta> with one hand, but he was one step late.

“Kuh.....!”

He endured the shock by concentrating prana on his abdomen and conversely took her arm and flung the girl away.

It was one of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Grappling Techniques, but because the young man with pigtail threw a fist pursuing the attack without pause, it was obscured and thus the girl rotated in the air and lightly landed. She immediately resumed shortening the distance and unleashed a coordinated attack with the young man with pigtail.

One of the usual countermeasure toward <Ser-Versta> was to strike at the bad points in maneuverability, but these two people always kept a distance as if almost closely clinging to Ayato and continued their attacks with minimal movements. Of course, such a feat was impossible with half-hearted skill.

“Know that World Dragon isn’t only <Divine Revelations>’s disciples!”

The girl unyieldingly shouted so.

Team Taotie was composed of representatives selected from a division school other than <Divine Revelations>’s sects and, although there was no <Page One>, all the members were warriors within the ranking of #20.

Although, Ayato has already seen through the movements. The fact that he has been cornered to the defensive fight so far was because Team Taotie’s leader, the young man with shihaku eyes^[31] ability was very troublesome.

“Fuhahahaha! That’s right! And World Dragon’s <Dante>s aren’t necessarily Taoists, you know?!”

At that moment, Ayato felt bloodlust behind him and promptly jumped aside.

Immediately after, a beast’s maw appeared as if it was mowing down from the empty space and clenched its sharp fangs with intense force like a bear trap. That jaw immediately faded and disappeared, but because it appeared just like that without showing any sign, Ayato was not able to concentrate on the two people before his eyes. It was difficult to sense this sort of ability even his state of “cognition”.

The girl and the young man with pigtail immediately pursued Ayato who landed, and a huge mouth opened again at the feet of Ayato, who tried to intercept them. Sharp fangs ambushed him earlier than he tried to evade, and the girl and the young man did not break their chain of attacks too.

³¹ remember sanpaku eyes ??? you knew the eyes which the white part is visible above or below the iris right ??? yeah, sanpaku gan(三白眼) literally meaning three white eyes, shihaku gan (四白眼) literally for “four white eyes” meaning eyes which both the white part above and below the iris are visible, for more info, Google 四白眼 image. This is a Chinese term, btw.

The young man with shihaku eyes did not seek versatility like a Taoist and probably just polished only the special characteristic of his ability. Anyway, the activation of his ability was fast.

“Ooops.....!”

The jaw consecutively attacked Ayato who lost his balance and rolled on the ground as he escaped.

“We can! We can do it! First, we’ll bring down <Murakumo> like this and then..... What!?”

As the young man with four eyes broke off mid-sentence, he opened his already big eyes even more widely.

“.....All right, it’s a good time, I guess.”

Ayato jumped up while smiling slightly.

The young man with four eyes restrained Julis and Saya with his ability until a while ago, and moreover, he was also moving by himself to the backing of the two vanguards that were holding back Kirin and Claudia. In fact, although for a short time, the ability of the young man, who accomplished all of this, could not be doubted.

However, probably because he judged that they seemed to be able to bring down Ayato — Though Ayato allured it to be so — though only slightly, he concentrated his attack too much to Ayato.

As a result—

“Haaa!”

“—I got you!”

At that opportunity, Kirin and Claudia respectively defeated the opponent before his eyes and cut off their school badges.

“C-Crap.....!”

From the start, the two girls were overwhelming superior to the two World Dragon’s vanguards in their abilities in one-on-one combat. Precisely because they only devoted themselves to restrain their opponents without seeking victory, and because there was the backup of the young man with four eyes, the two vanguards were able to barely hold back the two girls.

“Ayato, go!”

Julis’s Rectoluz attacked the girl and the young man, who nevertheless did not loosen their attacks to Ayato even one bit, and tore them off from Ayato.

“Kuh.....! Curse you, <Glühen Rose>.....!”

The girl gritted her teeth in vexation, but the three-dimensional attack of Rectoluz operated by Julis was fierce, so she had no choice but to parry it.

“Thank you, Julis!”

As Ayato took the opportunity and ran, he instantly shortened the distance to the young man with four eyes.

“Tsk! Not yet!”

However, four eyes thrust both his hands in front and a huge jaw appeared as if obstructing Ayato’s path — but.

“.....Kaboom”

The light bullet of Helnekrom shot by Saya blew it off.

“Gunuuuuuuuuuuuuuh!”

The young man with four eyes still did not give up. Though the size was smaller than the one of earlier, seven jaws simultaneously bared their fangs around Ayato.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique — “Night Crest Defilement (Blade)””

Ayato grasped *<Ser-Versta>* with both hands and slashed it while twisting his body as he ran through.

“I-Impossible.....!?”

He cut the seven jaws and the school badge of the young man with bulging eyes all at once.

“End of the match! Winner, Team Enfield!”

At the mechanical voice which reverberated on the stage, Ayato revealed a smile of relief.

*

“Phew..... as expected, the participants’ levels are in another dimension in the main battle, huh.”

Ayato, who went back to the waiting room after the end of the match and the winner interview, tiredly sunk his body in the sofa.

Comparing only combat ability simply, there were not many teams who were better than Ayato and company; but it would have been foolish to underestimate the other teams in *<Gryps>*.

As Team Enfield was one of the favorites, Ayato and company thoroughly worked out countermeasures no matter which team they faced.

“This time, we’ve put too much burden on Ayato, I guess. As expected World Dragon’s students — they can’t be taken lightly when it comes to close-range combats.”

“Well, at worst even if I lose, it’ll be fine if it results in giving advantage to the team.”

Team Battles were as such.

“Besides, in case that we can do nothing about it, it can’t be helped; but we’d be troubled if you were hurt. Even in case that you were to lose, please lose by school badge damage if possible.”

Though Claudia said so jokingly, her words were actually reasonable.

After all, even if the team were to win, it’d be a big problem if Ayato was not able to participate in the next match because he got injured. The Steering Committee disliked easy wins, in the <Gryps> which was a team battle, up to two people of a team not taking part was accepted. However, it was undeniable that the team would be greatly disadvantaged.

“Still, well aren’t we in a relatively better block?”

“Y-You’re right..... At least, it looks like we won’t confront Team Lancelot until the finals.”

Kirin agreed to Julis’ words.

By the drawing up held up yesterday, the 32 teams which won and advanced to the main battles were once again apportioned in a new tournament table. Fortunately, Team Enfield of Ayato was in a different block from Garrardsworth’s Team Lancelot that was the first on the list of the favorites.

“.....Those crazy guys are also in that block.”

Those guys, whom Saya spoke of, were Team Hellion that had rampaged before Ayato’s and her eyes the other day. Considering those mercenary students’ abilities and brutality, they could certainly say that they did not want to clash with them if at all possible.

“The team we should watch out in our block will be, as far as I can tell from the preliminaries, is Team Yellow Dragon. That <Hagun Star> is unfathomable.”

“Should I say as expected of <Divine Revelations>’s best disciple”

Claudia did not seem to have any objection to it. In fact, Ayato also agreed.

One might say that the overwhelming combat ability that <Hagun Star> showed in the second round far exceeded Ayato and company’s imagination.

(I can’t read through with only that, but that person’s close quarter combat ability is probably superior to Kirin-chan’s and mine.....)

“Ayato-senpai.....?”

As he probably made a grim face before he himself was aware of it, Kirin anxiously called out to him.

“.....No, it’s nothing. More importantly, isn’t it time already for the next match to begin?”

Ayato said so and opened the room’s space window as to change the topic.

Though he would have to think about some strategy regarding the <Hagun Star>, he decided to concentrate on what was before his eyes first.

“Oh, it’s already that time, huh.”

The gazes of all the members present in the room gathered at the space window.

St. Garrardsworth Academy’s black uniforms were appearing exactly at that time.

『Appearing from the eastern gate is the team that is a part of the Silver Wings Knights Squadron, which St. Garrardsworth Academy is proud of, and also the last <Gryps’> runner-up! Although I say that, well, the members have been replaced, but..... leaving that aside! It’s the entrance of Team Tristan led by the <Shining Sword (Cláomh Solais)> Elliot Forster!』

Cheers across the terminal screen and hype shaking the actual hall resounded two-fold.

『And, and! From the western gate, a best 8 from the last tournament! The greatly popular girls rock band that Queen Veil Girl’s Academy is proud of! It’s the entrance of Team Rusalka!』

Even for this team, cheers, which did not lose to Team Tristan’s, arose. On the terminal screen, Miluše and company responded to it by waving their hands as if it was their live hall. It was completely opposite to Team Tristan’s members who advanced solemnly.

“Now then everyone, who do you guys think will win?”

Claudia abruptly threw such a question with her usual smile.

“.....I say it’ll be Team Tristan.”

The first one to answer was Julis.

“Though I’ll say it like this, their basic fighting strength is too different. Rusalka’s coordination is certainly amazing. However, among their members, at best Miluše is the only one who can keep up with Elliot Forster as opponent.”

“I think so, too. Honestly, I don’t think they will be able to deal with Forster-san’s sword skill.....”

As the two said, Elliot Forster that they saw during the preliminaries improved his skill remarkably compared to last year.

No, it was not only his sword skill. His physical ability itself should have improved quite a lot, too.

On the other hand, not that big a change was seen to Rusalka’s members compared to last tournament videos. Of course, since they were in a growth period, their basic specs would rise and there was something to look out in their coordination of each member compared to last time; but it was unlikely for them to defeat Team Tristan with that alone.

In the first place speaking of team's coordination, Garrardsworth's Team Tristan, which originally prided itself on it, excelled in that area.

"In addition, there's that <Witch of the Holy Thorn (Persefore)>. She has quite a troublesome ability."

"Yes..... I think it's a natural team battle-oriented ability."

There was no objection on that opinion, either.

It seemed to be an ability of a quite rare type, but if they were to fight against them, even Ayato and company would suffer in dealing with it.

"What about you, Ayato?"

"Hmm....."

Considering all the aforementioned conditions, there was no factor denying Team Tristan's victory.

And yet, Ayato was not to reply immediately for some reason.

He probably thought of something.

"—I think it'll be Rusalka."

It was Saya who said so in place of Ayato who was unable to answer.

"Hou. For what reason do you think so?"

When Julis asked as she was interested, Saya expressionlessly shook her head.

"There's no reason. It's intuition."

".....I see."

Though Julis shrugged her shoulders with a slightly amazed expression, she did not rebuke it.

Then, Claudia clapped her hands as though to say time-out.

"Oh, looks like it'll soon begin. Well then everyone; please pay a close look at it. After all — the winner of this match will be our next opponent."

*

As soon as the match started, Elliot Forster took the lead and rushed out.

Even without being told anything, the two knights followed as if chasing him.

Garrardsworth's team had no battle formation. It functioned coordinately in all situations, and took the most appropriate action necessary and supported individual charge by

group's judgment. The team that was born from that contradiction obtained the ability to become one through strict discipline and continuous training.

Elliot easily repelled the countless light bullets that Mahulena shot from her space projection keyboard type ogre lux with his sword.

"Please, do not think that you can stop me with just this much.....!"

Elliot has lived a year of humiliation from the previous <Phoenix> carved in his heart.

It might even be said that the current Elliot was born thanks to that humiliation.

『But, as expected your sword is — still light.』

Elliot honestly accepted those words that Amagiri Ayato muttered with his defeat..... and crunched them into pieces.

(I decline a heavy sword. In that case, I shall hone my sword lighter and quicker.....!)

"That's as far as you can go!"

".....I won't let you do."

Tuulia and Päivi stood as to block Elliot's way.

But Elliot only eased up his speed slightly; then the two knights behind Elliot got past him, crossed swords with those two girls and thus created an opening.

Words were unnecessary for Garrardsworth's coordination. After all, Elliot wish was synonymous with the team.

".....Even if you didn't come, I've intended to come to you."

"I am not so tactless as to let allow a women to initiate the dance."

Miluše set up her guitar type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Calliope>, and responding to it, Elliot also took a stance with his one-handed sword type lux.

Both team fellow leaders; in other words, the one who won this match would win the match itself.

"Now, let's go!"

The one who made the first move was Miluše.

But, that was fine. Originally, Elliot excelled at Go no Sen^[32], and a one-kill strike as counter was his trump card.

³² keep the term here, the term is globally accepted in martial arts, Go no Sen is not just counter attack, it also mean to strike weak point when opponents attempt to attacks or parrying their attacks. If i have to using precise word, it'd be synchronization with opponent's attack rather than counter attack. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_no_sen

Elliot's sword point flickered like heat haze and went through to Miluše's school badge a moment faster than her slash from an overhead position—

Just before it, Elliot promptly turned his body around.

Immediately after, a high-pitched guitar's sound echoed; waves-like vibration shoo the air and crushed the ground into a fan form.

“Oops, that was quite dangerous..... so, this is vibration crush, huh.”

“Gunuh, you dodge it! But, I'm not done yet!”

Though Miluše attempted a pursuit while distorting her face in vexation, Elliot's sword flash glittered as he countered.

“Uwah!?”

Although Miluše defended barely defended against it, Elliot turned his wrist and continued by lunging a circular slash at an overwhelming speed. Miluše somehow endured that fierce attack with a light blade unfolded in a sword type.

In fact, she endured it more than what Elliot imagined. Though Queen Veil Girl's Academy was said to be the weakest of the six academies, she was still rank #3 even if she was rotten. It looked like she could not be quickly defeated in a direct assault.

Be that as it may, Elliot was already half-convinced of their victory.

This was because he felt that Noelle's preparations were ready.

“Uwah! I-It's no good.....!”

Perhaps because Miluše also noticed one beat later, she greatly jumped back as to escape and joined with Mahulena at the rear.

Elliot did not deliberately chase her.

The other members of Rusalka gathered near Miluše in a confused state.

Innumerable tentacle-like thorns slowly cornered them while crawling on the ground. Those thorns grew from underfoot of the girl — Noelle Mesmer, also known as the <Witch of the Holy Thorn (Persefore)>, at Team Tristan's rear, whom pressed her forehead with a staff shape lux and crouched down as if praying. Its range already covered up about half of the stage, and moreover, several thorns entangled with each other and also extended in the upper direction as they formed braces.

It was a rare ability commonly known as area type and although it takes time until activation, she could palce the effected range completely under her control.

Rusalka's members relentlessly attacked the thorns, trying to somehow make a breakthrough, but the thorns' regeneration speed was able to outpace them. Their defeat was literally creeping up on them.

Before long, the thorns locked up the Rusalka members in a corner of the stage like castles recited in a fairy tale.

“Now then, it’ll save me trouble if you accept to surrender now though.”

Elliot thrust the point of his sword at Rusalka, which was surrounded by thorns in every direction and was now completely trapped like a rat.

“Fo~ol, we absolutely decline!”

However, it looked like none of the girls including Miluše intended to surrender.

“Is that so? That’s too bad, but I guess I’ve got no choice.”

Elliot set up his sword and gradually shortened the distance.

He had no leisure to struggle in a place like this. The next opponent was finally Team Enfield. It was a perfect opportunity to get Amagiri Ayato back.

Though Miluše and company prepared for the attack while standing back to back, the thorns coiled their feet creating an opening.

“Wha, w-wait, there!”

Although they eagerly moved their hands and feet trying to break loose from them somehow, it was not enough to take off the thorns which tightly coiled around them.

And, Elliot and his teammates were not so foolish as to miss this opportunity.

“Got you.....!”

But at that time.

“—Damn, it’s impossible like this after all.”

Immediately after Miluše muttered so with her head hung down, along with an earsplitting guitar sound, a storm-like sound and a wave shock blew violently.

“Guaaaaaaaaah!?”

Elliot and company were mercilessly blown away without knowing why, and the thorns surrounding Rusalka were all torn off and disappeared.

Barely succeeding in landing, in front of Elliot, who raised his gaze, Rusalka, whose pupils had the brilliance of an eerie azure, set up their musical instrument type ogre luxes in postures like just before they started a musical instrument.

“Now..... let’s we begin the next session.”

*

“T-This is.....”

With her eyes glued to the space window as is, Kirin grunted.

Ayato and Saya, who said that Rusalka would win, were dumbfounded and at a loss for words.

The situation of the match reversed at a stretch.

This was because, since Rusalka blew off the thorns, they began to move as if they were completely different persons; and on the other hand, Team Tristan's state changed completely. Rusalka's movements became sharp and quick whereas Team Tristan's movements became dull and loose. That change was extreme and it was clearly not the effect of fatigue or damage. Which meant.....

"They strengthen themselves and weakened their opponents, huh....."

Ayato muttered so to himself.

"So, it turned like this after all..... Looks like this is <Lyre-Poros>'s true ability, eh."

Perhaps because Claudia was the only person who predicted it to some degree, she did not seem surprised.

"Do you know something, Claudia?"

Julis asked her in a sharp tone.

"No, nothing which could serve as countermeasures. Just, I happened to get my hands to only little information regarding those ogre luxes' backbone."

"Backbone, you say?"

"<Lyre-Poros> is, like this <Pan-Dora>, an ogre lux made by the hands of Professor Ladislav Bartsheik. So, I thought that their abilities shouldn't be to that degree."

Claudia took out the activation body from the holder to her waist as she said so.

"<Lyre-Poros> was originally one ogre lux. But, because the Ulm mana dite's power was so strong that no one was able to wield it, in the end there was no choice but to divide it into five. By doing so, it was thought that the burden of the wielders will be divided, too, but....."

After breathing a long sigh as she was troubled, Claudia continued.

"I guess that in the last tournament, they had probably not been able to skillfully draw out <Lyre-Poros>'s power."

While she was talking as such, Team Tristan's members decreased one by one.

Only Elliot Forster struggled until the end, but.....

"—End of the Battle! Winner, Team Rusalka!"

Before long, the mechanical voice announced the end.

Chapter 07: Noisy Night

“I see, the bottom of the ballast area, huh..... No wonder I wasn’t able to find it.”

Sylvia, while leaning on the wall in the shade of the corridor, laughed in a low voice.

『I’ll say this just in case, aside from going through that route not being a problem, it looks like you won’t be able to come back unless you’ve got a special ID, so be careful.』

Ayato’s voice was heard from Sylvia’s headphones.

She did not open a space window, but rather sent the portable terminal’s sound communication directly to the headphones.

“Hahaha. But, is it all alright? Telling me all this.”

『What would Sylvie do if we were in the reverse position?』

Though Ayato’s voice had a teasing tone, something like half-conviction could be heard there.

“.....Yes. Thank you, that’s a big help.”

Sylvia closed her eyes and tightly clenched her hand on her chest.

『Oh, and though late, I thank you for the box lunch. It was delicious.』

“Hmm, I’m glad to hear it. Actually, I said that I had confidence in my cooking, but the truth is that I was a little worried about whether or not it’d suit your taste.”

『.....But, considering the situation I was in, it’s a shame I wasn’t able to taste it calmly.』

“Eh? Ah, it was just before your match after all. I guess you wouldn’t be able to.”

『Hahaha.....』

Then, for some reason, a vague voice as if troubled was heard.

“Ah, by the way, tomorrow is finally the fifth round, isn’t it? Do your best; I’ll be cheering for you.”

『Considering your position, won’t it be bad if you don’t cheer for Rusalka, Sylvie?』

“Of course, I’ll be cheering for both sides. Those girls are my cute juniors after all.”

Sylvia’s words were from her true feelings.

Precisely because Sylvia adequately guessed things — though in her own way to the bitter end — and could thus adopt a clear-cut attitude, she was honestly able to cheer for both sides. That was Sylvia Lyynehey's basic stance in regards to everything.

But, even Sylvia was not like a saint who attained enlightenment. Naturally, there were things on which she could not adopt a clear-cut attitude; therefore she also had times when she was troubled and suffered.

And Sylvia did not dislike this weak side of hers.

“—Oops, sorry Ayato-kun. Looks like it's already time.”

『Got it. Then, later.』

As Sylvia cut the communication, she checked the time again and began to walk down the thoroughly cleaned corridor.

This place was Queen Veil Girl's Academy, the top floor of the twin hall East Wing.

There was a huge double door at the end of the corridor. When Sylvia lightly knocked on it, she soundlessly opened it and went inside the room.

“.....Ara?”

Except the side where the door was, the other three walls were fitted with glass. In that wide space that would let one feel bleakness, there was nothing other than an office desk and a chair by the back window. Multiple space windows floated around the office desk and a woman wearing visor-shaped glasses was sitting on the chair.

It was a familiar sight for Sylvia, but to her surprise, there were figures of preceding visitors today.

“Thank you for your hard work, everyone.”

“! Sylvia, san.....!”

The group of five standing at attention in front of the desk was Rusalka, who had just won their ticket to the quarterfinals today.

“What's the matter, Petra-san? Don't tell me it's another scolding?”

As Sylvia smiled asking so, the woman — Queen Veil Girl's Academy board chairman Petra Kivilehto — loosened her mouth.

Petra herself was also a <Strega>, who had participated actively in the <Festa> as a student of Queen Veil once; she was now an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation W&W, which was Queen Veil's mother organization, and she was also the producer of Sylvia and Rusalka. Anyway, she was an able woman in various ways.

“Half of it is that, but the other half is to praise them for today's good battle. Well, I also ended with that just now.”

The black visor glasses covering her eyes behind them, it was hard to guess her real intention.

“I see. Then, is the scolding about the matter of the day before yesterday?”

“Ugh.....”

To Sylvia’s words, Miluše and company conspicuously changed their expressions.

Sylvia has already heard about the circumstances, and she also heard about the details from Ayato just now.

“During the period of the <Festa>, not only did they invent a pretext and pick a fight with a member of a different team, they also caused an uproar by fighting with another team. Moreover, one of them went missing afterwards. Well, it can’t be helped even if you’re scolded, right?”

“.....Yes.”

Said Rusalka, who looked down with docile faces.

“—But apart from that, I guess I should also give you my thanks.”

“Eh?”

Miluše looked back at Sylvia with a puzzled face.

“After all, the reason that you flared up at Ayato-kun was because you were worried about me, right? I’ve heard it.”

“N-No, that’s, um.....”

To Miluše who wandered her eyes as she was embarrassed, Sylvia slightly shrugged her shoulders and asked a question.

“So, what do you think? The Amagiri Ayato that you girls met, was he the kind of person to deceive people?”

“.....No.”

Unexpectedly, the one who answered first was the one with a personality of being quick to pick a fight, Tuulia.

The other members shook their heads as to follow her.

“Hmm, I see. That’s great.”

As Sylvia smiled sweetly, Miluše opened her mouth as to snarl at her.

“B-But, this and that are different! We won’t hold back in tomorrow’s match! I’ll also beat him into a pulp!”

“Of course. You girls are Queen Veil’s representatives, so you must do your best. But, Ayato-kunTeam Enfield is strong, you know? Will you be all right?”

Though Sylvia said so jokingly, Miluše answered irritated.

“Of course! We may look like this, but we are aiming for the championship after all! And then, one day — we’ll surpass you and become the world’s best artists!”

After Miluše thrust a finger at Sylvia, she squared her shoulders and left the board chairman room.

“.....That’s right.”

“Yes, yes!”

“Well said, Miluše!”

The other Rusalka members followed after her while nodding emphatically, but only Mahulena, looking at her teammates, Sylvia and then Petra in turns, left the room after apologizing “sorry, sorry” several times.

“Please, don’t tease them too much, Sylvie.”

After waiting for the door to be closed, Petra complained so with a sigh.

“They are already unstable due to <Lyre Poros>’s price after all.”

The ogre lux <Lyre Poros>, that Rusalka used, had a strong Ulm mana dite as its core to the extent that its control had finally become possible by dividing it into five. Its price is “mind corrosion”. The initial model before being divided into five was an ogre lux with a story saying that most of its wielders suffered from a mind undermined by insanity.

Even after being settled to the current form, it was said that the wielder becomes more impulsive the higher his/her compatibility rate was and then he/she loses control of his/her emotions. Therefore, Mahulena, who had the lowest compatibility rate among the five girls, could maintain relatively normal thinking.

—But.

“But, those girls were already like that even before having been chosen as wielders though.”

“.....”

To Sylvia’s words, Petra cleared her throat and changed the topic.

“By the way, it looks like they first tried to use your relationship with Amagiri Ayato to make you fall, you know?”

“Hahaha, should I say it’s as usual again.....”

Sylvia could not help but smile wryly.

She found it very lovely for them as that led them to the thought that Sylvia might be being deceived and they ended up going for a completely opposite action.

“So, how is it actually? You aren’t possibly serious, are you?”

“And what if I am?”

When Sylvia returned a question, Petra sighed again and held her forehead.

“Sigh..... Really, be it you, those girls, or Chloe, why do all the girls, whom I set my eyes on, act like this.....?”

“Oh, I thought that you’ll get angrier.”

“I’d have been, if I could do something about it by blaming you.”

As Petra said so and stood up, she curved her mouth into a light smile.

“Well whatever. About this matter, I’ll overlook it to some extent. I trust you after all.”

(Though it’s a lie)

Sylvia inwardly stuck out her tongue.

Petra Kivilehto was originally a coldhearted and calculating person. But at the same time, there was no mistaking that she loved the academy’s students as board chairman. She made up for that facet by not trusting others at all.

“But, please be a little prudent regarding the other matter.”

“Which means?”

By other matter, she probably meant Sylvia looking for Ursula’s whereabouts.

“Have you already heard about the organization called Golden Bough Alliance?”

“Hmm, no, I haven’t.”

“Me, too.”

“.....Huh?”

When Sylvia turned a blaming gaze, Petra put her hands on the desk and slightly bent herself forward.

“Don’t you get it? I, an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, am saying that I’ve never heard of it, you know?”

“.....”

“Recently, though very rarely, that name has been caught in our intelligence network. This coincided with the time when your action deepened.”

It was the time when Sylvia expanded her search range to the ogre luxes.

“The details are completely unknown. And it isn’t like something happened directly. But..... this organization is probably extremely dangerous.”

“In other words, it’s just your intuition?”

“Are you dissatisfied?”

Petra was excellent. Her judgment this time was probably correct, too.

But even so, Sylvia was not mature enough to obediently agree with it.

In the first place, Sylvia’s and Petra’s positions were equal, so there was no reason why she must one-sidedly obey Petra’s orders. Sylvia used Petra, and Petra used Sylvia. That has not changed since the time when Sylvia was found by Petra and signed a contract to become a songstress.

“I understand. I’ll reduce the frequency. And I’ll do it more carefully than before.”

This was the best compromise she could offer.

“.....Fine by me.”

After being silent for a little while, Petra shortly said so.

*

“—!”

When Claudia returned to her room, a woman with a perfect smile without any rips was relaxing on the sofa in the dimly lit room.

“It’s been a while, Claudia.”

“.....If it isn’t Mother. Long time no see.”

After being taken aback for a moment, Claudia immediately returned a perfect smile similar to her mother — Isabella Enfield’s.

She did not ask the meaningless question of how her mother entered this room.

The other party was Isabella, so she had a free pass to go wherever she wanted in this academy. After all, she was a top executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation Galaxy, parent organization of Seidoukan Academy.

In the first place, if she — or more precisely if they seriously intended to get rid of Claudia, they should be able to crush her even immediately.

It would be easy for them to make her drop out of school, imprison her or even take her life. The reason why they did not do so was because the interference from the other Integrated Enterprise Foundation that Claudia set up worked to some extent, and above all, because it was too easy to do it.

There were plenty of methods to get rid of Claudia, But giving the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations such an opening to take advantage of would be a large

disadvantage to them (Galaxy). As for Galaxy, they wanted to avoid that as much as possible. As a result, their decision would be put off until the very last minute.

And that was precisely Claudia's aim.

"So, what kind of business do you have with me today?"

"Is it so strange for a mother to come to meet her daughter?"

"Unfortunately, I have no memory of you doing anything mother-like for me."

Claudia indifferently spitted out with her smile as is.

"Ah, please do not get me wrong. Despite that, I love you as such. Just like Father."

"What a coincidence. Me, too."

There was no lie in each other's words. Although she was the Integrated Enterprise Foundation top executive that had undergone the mind adjustment program on several folds, she was not a machine.

Rather, one might have said that there was no meaning to it if they became like machines.

Therefore, Isabella actually loved Claudia, too. Just that it was dwarfish in comparison with the love that she dedicated to Galaxy.

"Don't tell me that you possibly came here now to persuade me?"

"Of course. You and I are quite alike after all. I believe I understand at least that it would be meaningless to do it."

Claudia frowned slightly.

Although those were words that she has been told so much until she got fed up with them from the time when she was a child, Claudia thought of the woman before her eyes to be an absolutely incompatible existence to herself. This was because Isabella was a human being who devoted her all to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and Claudia was a human being who lived only for herself.

"Would you soon tell me about your business then?"

When Claudia asked so again, Isabella softly narrowed her eyes.

"I want to talk a little with you, you see?"

"Talk?"

"Yes, the motive which drove you to such a folly, its purpose..... we don't have enough information about it. So, all that is left to do is asking you directly, right?"

"And do you think that I will obediently tell you?"

Though Claudia checked so, Isabella continued without caring about her intention.

“Of course, you will. After all, there is the need for you to do so, right?”

“.....”

Though at this late hour, Claudia realized how troublesome of a person she was dealing with as she muttered so in her heart.

Isabella saw through people's actions as if it was natural.

“I do not know your purpose. But, I understand that you instigate us to take action, restrain us, and are trying to lead us as you want. To that end, you will have to give us information, right? Then, hurry up and do it.”

“.....I understand.”

Though it was earlier than expected, there was no problem.

Either way, it was necessary to perform some adjustment to the situation in order to prepare the stage of the final act. She might as well get it over with in this place.

“I cannot tell you both my motive and purpose, but I will reveal to you my cards to some extent. Let's see, first..... how about the reason why you people, Galaxy, must absolutely obstruct my action?”

“.....That is very interesting, indeed.”

Isabella twitchily moved her eyebrows.

“Professor Ladislav Bartsheik, whom I wish to meet with, is kept in custody by you people. The reason being that the professor is the spiritual leader of the <Dusk of Jade> and it would be a big scandal if it was known that an existence that instigated the ringleaders of that incident — that such a person was registered at Seidoukan. Not to mention Seidoukan, but Galaxy's image will be greatly spoilt, too. That's why, until you people of Galaxy make no small concessions to the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations, you freeze his judgment..... is what is known of the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations, I guess.”

As Claudia talked up to there, she sat down on the sofa in front of Isabella.

“However, what you people really wanted to conceal was not the professor. But, the ogre lux that the professor created half coincidentally — that <Varda Vaos>, which possesses a clear self and ability that even <Genestella> cannot freely handle, was the existence that you people had to keep in the darkness by all means — am I wrong?”

“.....How do you know that?”

Agitation could not be inferred from Isabella's expression.

But, Claudia did not miss the fact that her voice slightly trembled.

Right. Even Isabella was a human. Not a machine.

“The *< Dusk of Jade >* was an incident that students inoculated with *< Genestella >* eugenic ideology by *< Varda Vaos >*’s ability caused. Rather than the professor tagging along with it, far more importantly — and that, if handled poorly even a little, it is a truth that will cause trouble even for Galaxy. Yes, of course. After all, *< Varda Vaos >*, which you people have not yet grasped the whereabouts, can freely mass produce terrorists by brainwashing humans — in other words, this incident and that incident, which are occurring even now all over the world; perhaps *< Varda Vaos >* might have taken part in all of them. Moreover, if it was a human attached to Galaxy that created it, it is not as if you do not know how much responsibility will be pinned down on you people. At least, the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations will definitely not overlook such delicious material.”

“.....”

Isabella stared at Claudia in silence.

“And I will answer your question of earlier. How do I know that? How do I know highly confidential information that is known only to the top executives of Galaxy? It is simple. This is because you told me.”

“.....I did?”

Finally, Isabella opened her eyes wide.

It was an expression that Claudia saw for the first time in her life.

A meaningless and unnecessary joy appeared in her heart and then vanished immediately.

“More accurately, this child that you gave me when I was young.”

Claudia said so and took out the activation body of *< Pan-Dora >* from the holder of her waist.

“.....! No, but, that can’t be.....”

It seemed like Isabella guess with that alone.

She was indeed excellent.

“Fufufu, *< Pan-Dora >*’s price is personally experiencing every possibility of one’s own death inside a dream. The dream’s contents melts and disappears at the same time as one wakes up — but it is still information profitable enough, even if it’s in fragments. Of course, since it is to the bitter end knowledge of an uncertain future, I cannot draw a picture of the future no matter how I put those fragments together. However, guessing information of a definite past from there is possible.”

“.....I see.”

As Isabella blew out a deep, long breath, she stood up from the sofa.

“I understand. It looks like you are a far more dangerous existence than what we had previously imagined.”

“Fufufu, have you finally noticed it?”

For an instant, Isabella and Claudia's gazes fiercely clashed with each other; then both of them immediately turned their faces away.

“I hope that Galaxy will arrive at a conclusion desirable for me.”

As Claudia said so to Isabella who headed to the door, the latter answered without turning around.

“In that case, I hope that you guys will be defeated even tomorrow if possible.”

And then she left the room as is.

And while suppressing her welling loud laughter, Claudia, who was left alone in the room, muttered to no one in particular.

“Fufufufufu.....! It will not go like that, Mother. I finally came so far. I cannot afford to stumble here after coming this far.....!”

*

In the dim workshop of the Meteoric Engineering Research Club, only the sound of Saya tapping a physical keyboard and the sound of machines running resounded.

“.....Hey, Saya. Do you know that we have a match tomorrow as well?”

When Ayato, who sat in a chair a small distance away, asked while being amaze, Saya stared at the space window and answered without turning around.

“That's why I'm hurrying like this.”

“No, I don't mean that.....”

Though he understood that it was useless even if he said that, he could not help but say it.

It was already late at night. Because tomorrow's fifth round would be from 14:00, as expected it was a time that if she did not rest her body soon, it might affect the match.

Even so, Saya showed no signs of stopping her lux's customization. As she more or less seemed to get into the final adjustment stage, the lux, in its activation body as is, was put in a box-shaped pedestal where countless cables extended.

“.....It's my fault to not have made it in time for the main battle, too. I can't cause troubles to the team any more than this. I must make it in time for the next match no matter what.”

“I think that everyone will be troubled if you were to get sick because of this though.”

Time was largely taken due to the incident with Team Hellion and her plan seemed to have been out of order; but there was no help for it then. There was no way that Claudia and company would blame her for that.

—But, Ayato understood well that that was not the problem.

“Ayato, you too should go back and rest.”

“I took a nap, so it’s fine..... Well, I’ll leave if you say I’m distracting you though.”

“.....No, that’s not it, but”

Saya stopped her hands for a very short moment, and then resumed her work after answering so.

Silence reigned once again.

Only the sound of Saya tapping the keyboard and the sound of machines running continued resounding.

Ayato kept quiet as is, only looking at Saya’s back.

“.....Ayato”

Before long, Saya suddenly opened her mouth while still moving her hands though.

“Hmm?”

“Ayato, have you thought about the future?”

“The future?”

Because it was too vague and he could not grasp the intention of the question, he asked so in return.

“Assuming that we win the <Gryps> and you are able to have Haru-nee wake up safely — after that.”

“That..... I’ve never thought about it.”

When he honestly answered as it was really the truth, Saya shook her shoulders as she chuckled.

“Yes. I thought so.”

“And you too, Saya, is there anything that you want to do?”

About one of the reasons why Saya came to this academy, that is “making her father’s luxes known to the world”, she has already achieved it.

“.....Saying that I want to do something may be slightly wrong.”

Saya shut her mouth as she pondered; and soon after, she continued shortly.

“But, I made a resolution.”

“Resolution?”

That was again a vague statement.

“But anyway, I’ll do what I have to do tomorrow, so — all right, it’s completed.”

Then, Saya said so, stood up and bounced her voice joyfully. It looked like she was over with her work.

She took out the activation body as is from the pedestal and, after finishing a small check, deployed the lux.

“! This is.....!”

“.....Fufufu”

To Ayato, who opened his eyes wide, Saya proudly stuck out her small chest.

Chapter 08: Idol Decisive Battle

『— The 24th <Gryps> is finally at the fifth round, the quarterfinals! In the first match of this round will be Seidoukan Academy's Team Enfield, who have crushed all of their opponents with a display of overwhelming force so far and—!』

As Ayato and company came out of the entrance gate after being called by the voice of Miko, the live reporter, cheers that grew bigger each time they won and advanced to the next round shook the Sirius Dome once again.

『Their opponents are one of last <Gryps>'s best 8, the team that overturned the seemingly unfavorable situation of going up against Team Tristan, who happened to be last tournament's runners up, in the fourth round! The world-famous all-girls rock band, Team Rusalka!』

The Rusalka members advanced from the opposite gate while smiling.

When they entered the hall, responding to the cheers all the while, the air of composure they exuded made one question as to whether it was really right before a match.

While the commentator Shizuna introduced both teams' members, both parties went down to the stage and advanced until the fixed start position.

“—Well~ then, I apologize to you guys in advance, but as a continuation from the fourth round, we shall overturn these overwhelming odds again.”

The leader Miluše carried the guitar type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Calliope> on her shoulder and grinned in a provocative way.

“Unfortunately, it seems that you girls' way of fighting last time has been highly evaluated and the prior odds seemed to be fifty-fifty.”

Claudia, who took the provocation head on, calmly replied so.

“Hmm, I see. Well whatever. Either way, we'll be the ones to win!”

“.....I don't think so.”

Then, Saya, who stood before Miluše as if to replace Claudia, threw an enthusiastic and sharp gaze.

Miluše, who saw the school badge gleaming on her (Saya) chest, opened her eyes wide as if she was surprised.

『—And this time, the leader role has been passed from player Claudia Enfield, who has acted as Team Enfield's leader in all the matches so far, to player Sasamiya Saya.....』

“Heeh, so you’re the leader today. Interesting.”

“.....Personally, I don’t dislike you.”

Though Saya’s gaze burned with intense flames, her words were somewhat calm.

“But, we’ll be the ones to win. I can’t yield on this.”

“Pooh-pooh! We can’t as well!”

After Saya and Miluše had their gazes meet and clash with each other to the extent that sparks seemed to appear, they turned on their heel at the same timing and went back to their original positions.

Team Enfield’s battle formation was Ayato, Kirin and Claudia in the front row. Behind them was Julis with the support role. And finally Saya, the leader, in the back row.

On the other hand, Team Rusalka was set up as followed: Miluše and Tuulia, who set up their guitars type ogre luxes, in the front row. Behind them, Päivi, who deployed her floating drum type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Erato>, and Monica, who stuck up her bass type ogre <Lyre Poros-Melpomene> on the ground, stood in a line; and Mahulena, who prepared her space projection keyboard type ogre lux <Lyre Poros-Thalia>, was in the back row

『——The start time is steadily approaching! Both parties seemed to have already made their preparations! Now then, which team will gain the ticket to the semifinal?!』

As if responding the voice of Miko, who could not hide her excitement, the mechanical voice’s sentence resounded.

“<Gryps> fifth round first match, battle start!”

Immediately after the declaration, a brutally heavy bass sound which blew away all those sounds and washed over them, ran through the stage.

“——!”

Ayato, who was going to launch a preemptive attack, almost sank down on his knees unintentionally due to the heavy shock.

His body was heavy as if he has been stuck in a tar pit. The air was sticky; it was as if lead was embedded in his hands and feet.

(This again..... It’s stronger than I expected.....)

Ayato stared at Monica — her ogre lux that was the source of this heavy bass sound. The bass, which deployed a blade of light in an ax form, felt somewhat ominous appearance wise.

Above all, this heavy bass sound strongly affected his concentration ability. The state of “cognition” which was activated had been completely negated.

This perception expansion technique in the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style required one to concentrate their mind to the utmost, and was originally unrelated to having prana or not. However, Ayato, having previously broken his big sister's seal with an incomplete method by breaking the key to the first level, wasn't able to raise his consciousness to the stage where prana began to leak out and become noise, much like the situation in front of him.

At the same time, it meant that the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style's hidden techniques, to which the state of "cognition" was required, could not be used.

"Oops, this is bad!"

Immediately after, a crushing vibration wave released by Miluše and Tuulia attacked Team Enfield's vanguard (i.e. Ayato, Kirin and Claudia). Although the air rattlingly shook and Ayato and company promptly evaded it, the ground where they were standing until just before was suddenly gouged out.

The two ogre luxes were both guitar types. Their ability was the same. However, in contrast with Miluše's ogre lux that deployed a sword type blade, Tuulia's deployed a trident type blade.

"Sorry, but we're going all out from the very beginning this time!"

"Ha-ha! Be stupefied by our sound!"

The blue light that their ogre luxes' Ulm mana dites emitted was similarly lit in the pupils of Miluše and Tuulia who said so.

Furthermore, as the fingers of Mahulena, who was in the back row, danced on the space projection keyboard, multiple light bullets appeared around her — and were shot at high speed at Ayato and company.

"Bloom proudly — Livingstone Daisy!"

The fiery chakrams created by Julis dashed through the sky to repel several of these light bullets.

But, their movements lacked vividness and the flames became somewhat feeble as well.

In fact, these chakrams vanished like mist after Päivi beat her floating drum.

Sound pressure protective wall — that was Päivi's ogre lux's ability. Upon close inspection, one could see that a space of about 1m diameter was distorted like ripple. It was slightly similar to Ardi's protective wall, but hers seemed to be able to deploy in small sizes in large quantity. Although, accordingly the hardness was not as high as Ardi's.

"Kuh.....! Sorry, but my prana's concentration isn't going well after all.....! It looks like the support's timing will be slightly off than usual.....!"

While Julis gritted her teeth with a bitter face, she said so while defending against the light bullets with her Rectoluz. Certainly under these circumstances, the one who had it hard the

most was probably Julis. After all, for a <Strega>, having one's prana's concentration obstructed was fatal.

"Got it, then first, as we planned.....!"

Ayato evaded the light bullets by twisting his body in mid-air and turned his gaze towards Monica.

But, a sideways slash of Tuulia's approached, aiming for when Ayato landed.

"I won't let you!"

"Guh.....!"

He promptly blocked it with <Ser-Versta>, but it was a surprisingly heavy blow.

Moreover, although it was divided in five, as expected of an ogre lux; Ayato was not able to burn the blade of light created by the guitar even when he blocked it with <Ser-Versta>^[33].

Tuulia then started a chain of consecutive attacks of slicing down from an overhead position, stepping forward and thrusting to the chest and making a whirl slash while turning her body. Her swordsmanship was sharp and fluent; it was so stylish that it was unthinkable from Tuulia's usual roughness. It showed that she had gone through basic training fairly well.

Though Ayato narrowly defended against the three consecutive blows, one might say that Tuulia and the current Ayato's close-range combat ability was almost equal.^[34]

Which means—

"Kyaaah.....!"

As he turned his gaze for only an instant, Kirin, who blocked Miluše's sharp slash with Senbakiri, was blown away.

Immediately after, <Pan-Dora>'s twin blades sandwiched Miluše's body in between them, but Miluše rotated the ogre lux in her hand, repelled them and then she drove in a sharp kick in return to Claudia.

"Oh my, this is quite intense.....!"

Although Claudia somehow avoided it as she leapt back, Miluše's attack pursued without pause.

(She's holding Kirin-chan and Claudia, just by herself.....!)

"Hey! Don't look away!"

³³ as you're all aware, <Ser-Versta> is an ogre lux which burns all creations; but it's different when it comes to some ogre luxes

³⁴ it is said current Ayato and it'll be said current Claudia and current Kirin below because they are under the effect of Monica's ogre lux, which is "Inhibition Weakening"

At that moment, Ayato felt a chill running down his spine.

When he quickly returned his attention to Tuulia, she has already put her finger on the guitar string.

(Crap.....! I can't avoid this.....!)

Tuulia's crushing vibration wave's range was wide. With the current Ayato's high power output, it would be impossible to escape out of the range.

—But.

“.....Kaboom”

The next moment, six lines of lights as wide as an Obi cut through the stage.

“Wha!?”

One of them accurately shot out the school badge on Tuulia's chest as it passed through Ayato's side — regrettably just before it hit, it was defended against.

“W-What was that just now!?”

“.....That was quite dangerous.”

“To think that she'll suddenly aimed at the school badge.....!”

Flustered voices leaked one after another from Miluše and company's mouths.

It would have been quite comfortable if even one of them was defeated with the surprise attack just now, but as expected it looked like it would not go so well. Though, it was enough for Ayato, Kirin and Claudia to be able to rebuild their stances with that opening.

“Wait, what was that.....?”

Miluše and company's surprised expressions were turned towards Ayato and company's rear.

Standing there was the figure of Saya wearing a large-scale lux. The lux, which was equipped with a huge back unit, was the particle cannon that Saya used for the first time against Ardi and Rimsi in the <Phoenix>'s semifinal before.

But as for the details, many parts were greatly modified. What stood out the most was probably the thruster for recoil control sprouting out from the back unit.

“.....Type 41 Induction High-Angle Fire Particle Cannon Waldenholt modified”

Setting up that lux with six muzzles, Saya muttered so in a small voice.

*

—A few hours ago, Sirius Dome's waiting room.

“I will confirm again, but the most troublesome abilities among the ogre luxes <Lyre-Poros> are Monica-san’s 『Inhibition Weakening』 and Mahulena-san’s 『Active Strengthening』. Unless we crush at least one of those two, we will probably have no chance of victory.”

Claudia said that in the last strategy meeting just before the match.

As far as she guessed from the fourth round’s video recording, it seemed that Monica’s <Lyre Poros-Melpomene> weakened the enemy group and Mahulena’s <Lyre Poros-Thalia> had the ability to strengthen all her allies. The latter seemed to have the ability to shoot light bullets as well, but it was not that much a threat compared to the strengthening ability.

“Therefore, our top priority targets will be those two. Judging from individual fighting strength, Monica-san is above Mahulena-san, however, position wise, she is a vanguard. I think that she is the relatively easy one to aim for. At the same time though Mahulena-san’s fighting strength is inferior to the other members, she’s always in the back row in order to devote herself to supporting. Taking into consideration Päivi-san’s defense ability, it is doubtful whether a long-range attack would reach her (Mahulena), so we would have a hard time reaching her. But, I think that it will manageable.”

Everyone was carefully listening to Claudia’s words with serious faces.

“.....Based on this, I will propose a two-phase strategy.”

Claudia raised two fingers.

“The one who will be the key for both phases will be you — Sasamiya-san. Please think of it as one part of the reason why you are left to be the leader.”

“.....”

Receiving Claudia’s gaze, Saya silently nodded.

“We should think it is likely that as long as Julis is under the influence of Monica-san’s ability, her backing as a <Strega> will not be performed smoothly. Therefore, I will have to remove Julis from the strategy and have her move completely freely as a mobile support. Of course, you will have to back us up as much as possible, but the vanguard members will move without assuming it.”

“.....It’s frustrating, but I think that it’ll be safe like that.”

While saying so, Julis bit her nail with a clearly dissatisfied face.

“I also intend to use <Pan-Dora>’s future foresight ability this time. I cannot use it too much when thinking about the future, but as Yatsuzaki-sensei said, there would be no meaning to it if we were to lose because I was stingy to use it. If possible, I would like to get it over with by using about 60 seconds though.....”

While saying so, Claudia extended her hand to <Pan-Dora> in the holder.

As of now, the stock with which Claudia could foresee was approximately 360 seconds. According to Claudia, in order to win against Team Lancelot, she would like to save at least 200 seconds; so when also thinking about the semifinal, she certainly would not like to use up more than 60 seconds here.

“Now then, I will tell you about the details of the strategy.”

When Claudia looked around at everyone, she began to talk in a low voice.

*

“H-Homing laser!?”

Before Saya’s large-scale lux, Miluše drew back as she was cautious.

Monica’s 『Inhibition Weakening』 does not affect the lux itself. Therefore, Saya was Team Enfield’s pivot/keystone in this match.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! The current us can deal with it easily enough.”

“.....You’re right. Her aim is certainly accurate, but the power isn’t that high. It’s in the scope where I can defend against it with my protective wall.”

“Besides, with the opponent’s leader carrying such a big thing on her back, her movements will also be limited, too. Rather, we have to think of it as an opportunity for us.”

“Hmm..... Yes, you’re right.”

It was Monica and Päivi who kept Miluše from panicking.

Indeed, seeing it like this, the team’s role division was well done as well.

Claudia quickly grasped Team Rusalka’s trend while setting up <Pan-Dora> in a low position.

Even in battle, the type who put substantial preparation like Monica and Päivi seemed to support the type who displayed their power by riding on with the momentum such as Miluše and Tuulia, so that they would not fall apart.

And—

“U-Um, Tuulia-san, you rushed in too fast.....! And Päivi-san, too, in your current position, a blind spot in the protective wall deployment range will be created, so please come back!”

The most troublesome one above all was Mahulena in the back row.

Though she was not the type to control the team, she was quick to find an opening, which looked like it might result in a fatal hole, and correct it.

“I won’t let you!”

Finding an opening in their battle formation disordered, Julis’s voice resounded.

“Crap.....!”

The Rectoluz's six swords slipped through Päivi's sound pressure protective wall and attacked Monica from overheard.

“Hmph! What, is such a thing..... wait, eeeh?”

Monica swung the blade of light unfolded in axe type and brushed it off, but of course Julis' aim was not there.

The repelled Rectoluz circled at equal intervals as if to surround Monica.

“—Come out, Gloriosa!”

At the same time as Julis shouted so, a magic circle unfolded at Monica's feet and six huge pillars of flames rose up like a demon's claws.

“What!?”

Monica stood stock still as she was caught in the huge palm of flames.

Since Julis did not show the shortened activation of the setting type ability using the Rectoluz in the preliminaries, Monica could not react as expected. The flames' claws closed so as to crush her.

—But, Päivi's protective wall unfolded as to stop it and just barely prevented it.

“T-That was dangerous, jeez!”

Monica tried to break out from the encirclement at that opportunity, but the other side was not so naïve as to overlook it. It would become quite comfortable if they were to bring down Monica here.

“Monica!”

“I won't let you do that!”

Kirin's sword strike blocked Miluše who was about to go to Monica's support.

On the other side, Ayato also seemed to be skillfully holding back Tuulia who was similarly going towards Monica.

Which means that from here on was the start of their strategy to decide the match. Claudia, who judged so, set up <Pan-Dora>, dashed and shortened the distance to Monica.

“.....I won't let you go.”

Standing in her way was Päivi who unfolded the huge floating drum type ogre lux like a shield.

“No, I am afraid to say—”

While smiling, Claudia said so and focused her consciousness on <Pan-Dora>.

At that moment, the world lost color and stood still.

—First, she dodges Päivi to the right. Immediately after, 12 light bullets are shot by Mahulena, who fired them around Päivi stealthily to the blind spot, and six shots among them will directly hit Claudia in the case that she goes straight ahead to Monica as is. **She goes back a half second.** She evades them by rolling down. Still, two shots hit her directly. **She goes back a half second.** She evades them by jumping. One shot hits her foot. She concentrates prana there and endures it. But, Päivi's sound pressure protective wall is unfolded as to push aside Claudia when she loses her balance (after being hit by one shot and having endured it). **She goes back one second.** She swings <Pan-Dora> and cuts off six light bullets. It is impossible by dashing at full speed. She gets hit by two shots. **She goes back a half second.** She lowers her speed and cuts off all the light bullets. Immediately after, she dodges the sound pressure protective wall unfolded to the front with a side step..... Or not. **She goes back one second**—

As Claudia eventually spent 16 seconds from the stock of the future foresight, the world began to move again.

“—that you cannot stop me only the two of you.”

When Claudia made a feint by moving one step to the left, she rotated her body as if dancing as she dodged Päivi to the right. <Pan-Dora>'s swords' slashes which drew two arcs repelled the light bullets shot by Mahulena from every angle, and Claudia went through the sound pressure protective wall, which Päivi unfolded as to hold her — which was late for a moment, by bending over and shortened the distance to Monica who just broke out from the cage of flames.

“Impossible!?”

“Is this <Pan-Dora>'s future foresight.....?!”

Päivi opened her eyes wide in shock and Mahulena muttered with a dumbfounded face.

(Well then, it's good so far. The problem is after this.....)

She slashed with <Pan-Dora> hung down in a low position, aiming at Monica's school badge.

“Wawawawa!”

Fortunately, Monica has not yet rebuilt her stance.

“How naïve~!”

But, her sword strike was blocked by Miluše who broke in.

The azure light shining in both her eyes drew an ominous, yet beautiful trace.

“Oh my, you have arrived quite early.....!”

Though it was something that she understood, it was basically impossible for the current Kirin to restrain the current Miluše by herself.

At the same time, that also meant that it was impossible for the current Claudia alone to outwit Miluše and bring down Monica.

Unless she overdid it greatly, that is.

(.....Well, I guess I have no choice.)

Claudia focused her consciousness on <Pan-Dora> again.

Since it was a rare opportunity as the opponent team's leader was before her eyes, she would rather really like to smash her school badge. However, it would be difficult for the current Claudia, whose physical ability was decreased due to Monica's ogre lux, no matter how much stock she spent. In that case, there was only one way.

—30 seconds. —40 seconds. —50 seconds.

Not enough yet.

—60 seconds. —70 seconds. —80 seconds.

Not yet.

—90 seconds. —100 seconds.

(.....Around here is the limit, huh.)

At the same time as Claudia smiled wryly, the world regained color.

“HAA!”

Claudia swung down the right hand's blade towards Miluše, but it was easily blocked. Although she thrust the left hand's blade with a slight delay as to skim through Miluše's side and aimed at the school badge of Monica behind her (Miluše), Miluše deflected the blade's trajectory by striking its inner part with her right elbow. Furthermore, she swung down her blade of light, aiming at the school badge on the chest of Claudia left wide open due to her attack. Claudia dodged it by twisting her body, and then drove in a scathing whirl slash at Miluše. Miluše promptly guarded with her guitar, but even Miluše was forced to stop her movement for an instant due to the sword strike that Claudia launched with all her strength.

Although she lost her balance, Claudia forcibly took a step forward and launched a slash to Monica, but—

“Don't look down on me!”

The unreasonable strikes repeated one after another was warded off by the blade of light of Monica, who had already rebuilt her stance.

Though Claudia tried to restore her stance, Miluše drove in a sharp kick to her abdomen before she could.

“Guh.....!”

Although she reduced the damage by focusing prana there as she could not avoid it, she was blown away and went down on her knee on the ground.

“Kyahahaha! A chance there, I won’t miss it!”

“!”

Monica, who engaged in pursuit there, swung out her blade of light unfolded in axe type and smashed Claudia’s school badge in two.

“I did it! The Daikinboshi!”^[35]

“—Kaboom”

And almost at the same time, a torrent of light that gushed out from behind Claudia like surging smashed Monica’s school badge.

“.....Eh?”

It was Saya’s homing blaster.

“Claudia Enfield, badge broken.”

“Monica, badge broken.”

Overlapping mechanical voices announced Claudia’s and Monica’s defeats.

In other words, it was a draw.

After the trial and error of a future foresight close to 200 times, the best result that Claudia picked out was this. The enemy lowered her guard the most the moment when she defeated her prey — she aimed there.

In a team battle, the defeated players naturally could not interference in any way afterwards regarding both allies and enemies.

The effect of the 『Inhibition Weakening』 which had made Claudia and company suffer so much until now was no longer.

“N-No way”

Throwing a sidelong glance at Monica who sank down to the floor with an expression on the verge of tears, Claudia took a breath of relief.

In any case, the first phase of the strategy was cleared.

(I leave the rest to you, everyone.....)

³⁵ 大金星 is a specific term in Sumo. Indicate when a wrestler took down a champion and take their title. In this case, Monica overcame Claudia, who is treated as champion, it’s like Ippon in Karate or kendo, rather than just a term, 大金星 is both a term and a title for the challenger.

As Claudia inwardly muttered so, she shifted her gaze to her comrades while withdrawing to the edge of the stage.

*

“Everyone, we will reset our battle formation once again. Please come back.....!”

“Even if you say so.....!”

Tuulia, who barely blocked Ayato’s thrust, distorted her face while stepping back.

By the fact that Monica was now out, the course of the battle, where Ayato and company were overwhelmingly pushed back, greatly changed its flow. On the general outlook, they were still about equal; but at least in Ayato’s and Tuulia’s local fight, Ayato completely got the upper hand.

Still, the reason why he could not settle the fight was because Päivi’s sound pressure protective wall broke in as support each time with precise timing.

“Bloom proudly — Snapping Firebloom of the Engulfing Dragon (Antirrhinum Majus)!”

Although on their side, Julis’ backing as a <Strega> was restored. Ayato re-set up <Ser-Versta> while feeling the heat of the dragon of flames dancing in the stage.

She would probably have to use her power to exclusively deal with Päivi. That being the case, Ayato would be able overcome Tuulia soon.

While looking over, Kirin had completely regained the sharpness of her techniques and was pushing back Miluše with “Conjoined Cranes”.

“.....Don’t underestimate me, <Murakumo>!”

“—!”

However, suddenly receiving a sharp forward blow from Tuulia, Ayato was astonished by her drive. It looked like it would not go so smoothly.

“Certainly, I’m no match for you when it comes to natural fighting strength. The fact that I’m able to exchange blows like this with you is thanks to Mahulena’s — her ogre lux’s power. But still, even I got a strong will, you know?!”

As expected, her strong will seemed to be no joke.

So, she won’t let herself easily being defeated, huh.

“Eei, no choice! Now that it turns like this, we’ve but to do it! Everyone, 『Resonance』 release!”

Miluše suddenly shouted so.

(『Resonance』.....?)

<Lyre-Poros> was an ogre lux with many mysteries. So it would be no surprise even if they were able to hide some sort of trump card.

The moment when Ayato temporarily moved back for caution's sake, Tuulia began to intensely pluck her guitar's strings.

—Immediately after, when he heard the heavy bass sound that sought to squash him into the stage, Ayato received a tremendous shock and was greatly blown to the rear of the stage.

“Kuuuh...?”

While twisting his body in mid-air, he somehow managed to land while kneeling.

“.....Ayato, are you all right?”

Saya, who was near, ran up to him, but Ayato raised his hand and held her back.

“Yes, somehow. But, just now.....”

It was not the crushing vibration wave. Otherwise, although it was abrupt, Ayato should have escaped from its range.

(Right. Rather, that just now was Päivi's.....)

While thinking so, Ayato who looked closely was shocked.

Before his eyes — the space surged, crossing dozens of meters as if it was warped over.

“This is..... Don't tell me that it's the sound pressure protective wall?”

Kirin too was similarly blown away with the attack just now, but she asked so while holding her head with one hand.

“If so, then it's quite crazy. The scale is dozens of times more than the ones so far.”

Julis with a grim face also joined them and muttered so.

When the sound pressure protective wall disappeared before long, the four Rusalka's members also gathered on the other side.

“Hmph! How is it? Are you surprised?! ”

While revealing a fearless smile, Miluše pointed out the guitar in her hand at Ayato and company.

“It's the killer move that restrictively draws out this <Lyre-Poros>'s original power by making the ogre lux of each of us resonate! You guys no longer have even a one in ten thousand chance of victory!”

“.....Considering all that, you girls seem to be quite in agony.”

“Ugh.....!?”

Miluše openly changed her complexion at Saya's pointing out.

In fact, all the Rusalka members were sweating as they were in pain.

The burden was probably big even for them when using that 『Resonance』.

“H-Hmph! Well whatever. Either way, it doesn't change the fact that you're done for with this!”

Miluše set up her guitar again as she said so.

At that moment, a chill ran down their spine.

“Don't tell me.....!”

The others seemed to have noticed it, too.

If the sound pressure protective wall, which was usually around 1 meter in diameter, was deployed in the current scale, then—

“You won't get away from this!”

Tuulia shouted loudly and raised her arm.

“Everyone, move back behind me!”

Julis rushed out forward and rapidly swirled the surrounding mana. She probably intended to activate some kind of defense ability.

However at this rate, she would not make it in time.

But then, another person, Kirin ran forward.

“Yaah!”

She first took a big step forward from a javelin throwing-like stance and threw Senbakiri.

Ayato had once heard it from Kirin. Like the art of sword drawing, it was a heretical technique of throwing thought out by the Toudou style's branch family; its name was “Devouring beak”^[36]

“Uwah!?”

The silver blade, which cut through wind and flew in a straight line, stuck up to the middle of the blade of Miluše's guitar.

“Bloom proudly — Great Crimson Heart Blazing Shield – Multi-Ring Blossom (Anthurium Multi-Floss)!”

With the little time that Kirin gained, Julis deployed multiple shields of flames.

³⁶ word play time, はしばみ is Japanese for sparrowhawk, however the Kanji is 嘴食み which translates “devouring Beak” considering the references to the bird.

At that moment, a sound similar to the screaming of guitars strummed by Miluše and Tuulia roared, and a raging crushing vibration wave blew towards them violently.

“Guuuuh.....!”

Their clothes were torn, their skins were cut and their bones creaked. They invested their prana to defense and protected their faces and school badges while crossing both their arms in front of themselves.

That violence, not knowing when it would stop, blew away half of the stage as if gouging at it.

Even so, when Ayato somehow endured it and raised his face, the emotionless mechanical sound announced.

“Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld, badge broken.”

“Toudou Kirin, badge broken.”

Having fallen on their knees there were the figures of the two girls.

“—! Julis! Kirin-chan!”

He hurriedly rushed over to them, but Julis stopped him while gasping painfully.

“.....Sorry, I couldn’t get through it. But since you two are safe, we still have chance of victory. I leave it to you.”

“Ayato-senpai, Saya-san..... We count on you.”

Kirin also said so while smiling with a face full of bruises.

It was thanks to the two of them becoming their shields that Ayato and Saya were safe.

“Yes, leave it to us.”

“.....”

Saya silently nodded as well.

“Damn.....! How stubborn.....!”

“Don’t mind it! We’ll do it no matter how many times!”

Miluše and Tuulia, who breathed heavily, set up their guitars again.

There was too much distance between Ayato and Miluše and company. No matter how you looked at it, he would not make it in time by attacking with his sword. In that case, there was only one way.

“Get blast awaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyy!”

At the same time that Miluše and Tuulia played the screaming-like sound again, Ayato poured prana into <Ser-Versta>.

—It was the Meteor Arts.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

He raised *<Ser-Versta>* which turned tremendously gigantic and slashed down along with a loud scream.

The Ulm mana dite emitted deep crimson brightness and bisected the crushing vibration wave, which was going to attack them, just like in the legend of Moses.

“Saya!”

“.....*<Full Burst>*”

Behind him, Saya was just over with the firing preparations.

“.....Kaboom!”

Towards the path that Ayato opened up, light was shot from all the six muzzles and swooped down on only Miluše — more precisely, her school badge.

—But.

“As if I’ll let you do!”

“Guaaaaaaaaah!”

Tuulia and Päivi stood in the way so as to protect Miluše. They literally put their bodies and protected their leader.

“Mahulena!”

“Yes!”

And then, as if responding to Miluše’s shout, Mahulena’s keyboard played a powerful, yet beautiful note in a very loud volume.

At that moment, azure flames flared up into Miluše’s pupils.

“No way, 『Resonance』 of the 『Active Strengthening』.....!?”

Ayato started running at once to stop her (Mahulena), but Miluše shortened the distance with Ayato in an instant — and ran past his side so as to evade *<Ser-Versta>*’s slash.

(She’s too fast.....!? Her aim is Saya, huh.....!)

Her speed was no joke. It might possibly be equal to that Zhao HuFeng’s or even more than that. Although Ayato was going to brake at once and turn around, he would hardly make it in time.

“With this, it’s oveeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

Miluše raised her guitar and shouted as she was convinced of their victory.

*

It happened exactly in the blink of an eye.

When one wondered that an azure trace flashed, the figure of Miluše, who raised her guitar, was before Saya's eyes. It was the perfect timing to attack the enemy in her unguarded moment.

But, Saya was calm to the bitter end. This was because Claudia's strategy was the second phase being "close range combat by Saya".

She purged Waldenholt modified and dodged Miluše's blow to the very last moment. The blade of light was struck into Waldenholt modified's huge back unit. Aiming for that moment, Saya pulled out Senbakiri that was still stuck into the guitar.

Miluše's eyes were dyed with surprise.

Saya fixed her breathing and swiftly swung Senbakiri.

It was a skill of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style that she had Ayato taught her only just a little in order to keep him company with his training.

The movements and techniques that she learned watching Haruka and Ayato's training scene.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill — "Twin Water Dragons""

Cross-like sword flashes were executed smoothly, surprising even herself—

"Miluše, badge broken"

"End of the Battle! Winner, Team Enfield!"

In the next moment, Miluše's school badge broke into four pieces, and fell onto the ground with a dry sound.

Epilogue

“Haa, we lost, we lost.”

On their way back to the waiting room, Miluše spoke somewhat indifferently while walking at the front with her arms around behind her head.

“.....How regretful.”

“That was close. No, you could say that there was a hair’s breadth between us and them.”

“Aah, not only we lost, but my hair was also burnt; it really is terrible.”

The other members who followed after also spoke regretfully, but they somehow had refreshed faces. Not uselessly dragging out something for long was one of the good sides of these girls.

Even Mahulena was surprised that she had admitted defeat so decisively. They had actually fought with all their power and lost, so it could not be helped. She honestly thought so.

“—Good work, everyone.”

As if she had been waiting for the Rusalka members to arrive, the figure of Sylvia came into view just before the waiting room.

“Sylvia-san..... Why are you here?”

Though Miluše blinked as she was bewildered, Sylvia smiled, put her hands on her waist and said as if it should’ve been fairly clear.

“Isn’t it obvious? After having showed me such a match, I had some words that I wanted to tell you no matter what.”

“Eh.....?”

“—It was a good match, really.”

“.....”

Including Mahulena, all the girls held their breath at these words and stood stock still.

Sylvia, seeing the Rusalka members act in such a way, smiled wryly, heaved a small sigh once and then continued further.

“Well, putting things bluntly, this thing called <Festa> is just a ludicrous show and I think that the system that permits it is worthless, but..... even so, I think it’s wrong to say that ‘everything happening there (in the <Festa>) is similarly foolish’. No, it may be foolish, but at least it’s definitely not worthless. There’s a meaning to it.”

Looking around at the Rusalka members, Sylvia continued with a gentle gaze.

“No matter the place, aiming for something with a strong will and with all one’s power is something splendid, and I think that it’s something worth of respect.”

When she talked up to there, Sylvia bashfully scratched her cheek as she was aware of herself being unusually talkative.

“Errr, so what I want to say is that — you were really cool. You aren’t bad, Rusalka.”

She then lightly struck Miluše’s chest with a fist, shortly said “see you then” and left.

The Rusalka members left behind stood dumbfounded for a moment, but before long;

“Ehe, uehehehehe.....!”

Without knowing who started it, the sound of weird laughter began to leak out.

“Yaah, so this means that she has finally recognized us, right?!”

The face of Miluše, who said so, relaxed from being tensed up.

“That Sylvia said that we were splendid.....! That we’re worth of respect.....! That we were really cool.....!”

“Yes, yes. I think you could say that this is already our big win!”

“.....I agree.”

As usual, these girls are truly calculating.

Even while thinking so, Mahulena could not stop her cheeks relaxing.

Well, it was no wonder. They were praised for their good fight by that Sylvia Lyyneheyem. There should be no students in Queen Veil that would not think of this as an honor.

Then, there was a call on Mahulena’s portable terminal.

『Thank you for your hard work, everyone.』

Petra’s calm voice resounded from the space window in a blackout state.

“Uwah, B-Board Chairman!”

All the members straightened themselves and adopted a posture standing at attention.

They had almost unintentionally forgotten, but Rusalka was defeated in the <Gryps>. Although they performed perfectly as a team, it goes without saying that results were demanded as a representative of Queen Veil.

『It was a shame for the match. Well, your opponent was just that strong, so it can’t be helped.』

“H-Huh.....?”

However, Petra, instead of reprimanding Rusalka, indifferently said as such.

“A-Aren’t you angry.....?”

To Miluše, who nervously asked, Petra’s voice continued as to admonish her.

『Since you have performed to the best of your abilities, I cannot demand any more than that. The results this time are enough.』

“Guh.....”

All the girls’ faces were distorted in frustration.

In other words, it meant that it was thought that they could only advance so far with their abilities. Although it was in fact the truth, it was not too different from being humiliated after all.

『— That said, it is unlikely to be your limit for the next <Gryps>』

“Eh.....?”

『In three years, I will have you become able to draw out <Lyre-Poros>’s ability to another level. Of course, the improvement of each member’s battle ability will be also indispensable, so consider that you will become even busier from now on.』

“Y-Yes!”

To these unexpected words, all the members’ faces were tightened.

That’s right. Although they had lost this time, there was still the next <Gryps>. At that time, they would just have to leave results that no one would be able to raise complaints against.

『.....With that said, I will first have you handle works suitable to your ability one by one for now. About five performance offers have come from the <Festa>-related program and news stations which will be broadcasted live tonight; so please head there immediately.』

“Huh.....? R-Right now?”

Their bodies, which were tired from the fierce battle a little while ago, screamed that they wanted to take shower as soon as possible and then fall down on their beds.

—But.

『Do you have any problem with that?』

“Ugh..... T-There’s none.....”

Of course, they could say such a thing.

『Ah, there are also two offers for songs amongst those offers, so I ask you to make preparations for those, too.』

After she had dumped those severe demands on them, the space window closed.

“.....Errr, um, let’s do our best, right?”

In the corridor where a heavy silence had descended, only Mahulena’s empty encouragement could be heard.

*

“Phew.....”

Ayato, who returned to his room after the end of the fifth round, fell down on his bed as soon as he arrived at the room.

“Good work. As expected, it looks like it’s quite tiresome for you with a 9:1 female to male ratio.”

Eishiro, who was sitting at the desk and was working on something, laughed as he teased him.

“The opponent was a team from Queen Veil, so it can’t be helped. Or rather, the tiresome part wasn’t there.”

“I know, I know, it’s just a joke. But well with this, next is the semifinal, huh. It’s going better compared to the <Phoenix>, right?”

“Well, many things have happened since then after all.”

He did not know whether or not they could win, but he would like to devote himself to the tournament without incident this time.

He raised his body while smiling; then as he was about to change his clothes, his portable terminal notified him of a call.

“Huh? I wonder who it is..... Saya, huh.”

While wondering what business she might have even though they have parted just a moment ago, he opened the space window.

『.....Ayato, could you come out for a moment?』

“Right now? As expected, today was tiring, so you too should do your best to rest right.....?”

Tomorrow was the adjustment day, so there was no match. Saya would also have time to finish customizing her luxes.

He suggested as such, but Saya shook her head in the space window.

“Then, is it some urgent business?”

『I only want to talk with you a little. And also — I want to use my “wish ticket”.』

“Eh? That’s..... Well, it can’t be helped, huh.”

Since that was taken out, he could not decline.

As Ayato scratched his head, he went down on the bed and smiled wryly.

“But, didn’t you say that you didn’t intend to use it for a little while?”

『..... I changed my mind.』

“I see. So, what kind of request will it be?”

While hoping that it was something too unreasonable, he asked so.

『Yes. My request is—』

*

“Is it really fine with this?”

“.....Yes, thank you.”

Saya said so and received the ice cream that Ayato held out.

Trees standing in a row at the promenade, where the evening sun shone, stretched their shadows, and together with a world dyed red, created a slightly fantastic scene. While walking side by side therein, Ayato peeked into Saya’s face in profile with a sidelong glance.

『—I want you to buy me ice cream.』

The request that Saya asked Ayato to the point of using her last “wish ticket” was such a trivial and simple thing. Ayato could not read at all Saya’s intention as to what kind of thought she made that request.

“.....Unexpectedly, Rusalka were interesting girls.”

Then, Saya suddenly said that.

“What is it, all of a sudden?”

“Unexpectedly, I don’t dislike people like them.”

“Hahaha, speaking of which, you said something like that before the match.”

It was something quite rare for Saya.

“When we were shut together in the underground, Miluše spoke to me. She said that if I don’t do what I want to do and that if I hold back my feelings, I’ll definitely regret one day.”

“Yeah.”

“After hearing it, I remembered that Haru-nee also told me something similar before.”

“Nee-san did?”

While being surprised at the fact that his big sister’s name came out unexpectedly, he urged her to continue.

“She said then that I should honestly tell my feelings to people like Ayato.”

When Saya said so, she moved in front of Ayato with a manner of walking as if hopping.

“Therefore, I also intend to do as such.”

And then when she turned to face him, she revealed a gentle smile and said.

“—Ayato, I like you.”

“Eh.....?”

Unlike the previous words, they were sincere, perfectly honest, and above all, earnest words. They were words delivered with determination after overcoming a stream of hesitation and anxiety.

Even Ayato understood at least that much.

“If possible, I want to be next to Ayato forever.”

The bright red setting sun shone on her back.

In the world colored with red and dark, only Saya’s smile seemed to clearly shine.

“It’s fine. You can give me your reply anytime. Just..... I only wanted to let you know.”

When Saya said so, she turned and left with the setting sun with quick steps.

Ayato, left speechless, could do nothing but watch her leave.

